

## ISAIAH

The book of the prophet Isaiah is one of the most beautiful pieces of prose in the world of literature. The beauty of its language overwhelms the reader. The fact that the Word of God is translated into the word of man is only surpassed by the fact that the Word of God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, a fact of which Isaiah testifies. Anyone who approaches a study of this book must do it with fear and trembling. To study *The Book of Isaiah* is like tackling the Bible as a whole.

J. Sidlow Baxter, in *Exploring the Book*, introduces his analysis of Isaiah with the observation: “What Beethoven is in the realm of music, what Shakespeare is in the realm of literature, what Spurgeon was among the Victorian preachers, that is Isaiah among the prophets. As a writer he transcends all his prophet compeers; and it is fitting that the matchless contribution from his pen should stand as leader to the seventeen prophetic books.” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* observes: “For versatility of expression and brilliancy of imagery Isaiah had no superior, not even a rival. His style marks the climax of Hebrew literary art. Both his periods and Genius and descriptions are most finished and sublime. He is a perfect artist in words.”

The Hebrew name of Isaiah is *yeshā'yahu*, or *yeshā'yah*, meaning: “Yahweh saves.” He was the son of Amoz. We know that Isaiah was married and had at least two sons called, Shear-jashub, meaning “a remnant shall return,” and Maher-shalal-hash-baz, “hasting to the spoil, hurrying to the prey.”<sup>1</sup>

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states about Isaiah: “He seems to have belonged to a family of some rank, as may be inferred from his easy access to the king (Isa 7:3), and his close intimacy with the priest (8:2). Tradition says he was the cousin of King Uzziah. He lived in Jerusalem and became court preacher.”

About the period of his prophetic ministry, *Easton's Bible Dictionary* states: “He exercised the functions of his office during the reigns of Uzziah (or Azariah), Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1:1). Uzziah reigned fifty-two years (810 BC - 759 BC), and Isaiah must have begun his career a few years before Uzziah's death, probably 762 BC. He lived till the fourteenth year of Hezekiah, and in all likelihood outlived that monarch (who died 698 BC), and may have been contemporary for some years with Manasseh. Thus Isaiah may have prophesied for the long period of at least sixty-four years.”

*The Book of Isaiah* has been the focus of criticism by the school of Higher Criticism, which contends that a prophet who lived during the Babylonian exile wrote the chapters 40 through 66. J. Sidlow Baxter, in *Exploring the Book*, quotes Archibald McCraig, who writes: “According to the old tradition, the prophet Isaiah was sawn asunder. Of the truth of the tradition we cannot be sure, but we know that one of the earliest feats of the Higher Criticism was to perform the like operation upon his prophecy.”

For our study we will follow the outline provided in commentary on Isaiah by J. Alec Motyer, in the series of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*.

### Outline of Isaiah:

#### THE BOOK OF THE KING (1–37)

##### I. BACKDROP TO THE MINISTRY OF ISAIAH: THE AUTHOR'S PREFACE (1 – 5)

- a. Heading (1:1)
- b. A comprehensive failure (1:2–31)
  - i. The national situation (1:2–9)
  - ii. The religious situation (1:10–20)
  - iii. The social situation and its consequences (1:21–31)
- c. The ideal lost and found (2:1 – 4:6)
  - i. Heading (2:1)
  - ii. The great 'might have been' (2:2–4)

1. See Isa. 7:3; 8:2.

- iii. The actual Jerusalem – part one (2:5–21)
- iv. The actual Jerusalem – part two (2:22–4:1)
- v. The greatness that is ‘yet to be’ (4:2–6)
- d. Grace exhausted (5:1–30)
  - i. A total work and a total loss (5:1–7)
  - ii. The stink-fruit harvest and its consequences (5:8–30)
- II. LIGHT BEYOND THE DARKNESS: THE COMING KING (6 – 12)
  - a. The individual, atonement and commission (6:1–13)
  - b. Darkness and light in Judah (7:1–9:7)
    - i. The moment of decision (7:1–17)
    - ii. Divine judgment (7:18–8:8)
    - iii. The believing, obeying remnant (8:9–22)
    - iv. The royal hope (9:1–7)
  - c. Darkness and light in Israel (9:8–11:16)
    - i. The moment of decision (9:8–10:4)
    - ii. Divine judgment (10:5–15)
    - iii. The believing, obeying remnant (10:16–34)
    - iv. The royal hope (11:1–16)
  - d. The individual in the community: salvation, singing and proclamation (12:1–6)
- III. THE KINGDOM PANORAMA: THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HAND (13 – 27)
  - a. The first series of oracles: sure promises (13:1–20:6)
    - i. Babylon: a look behind the scenes (13:1–14:27)
    - ii. Philistia: the Lord’s sure promises to David (14:28–32)
    - iii. Moab: salvation refused by pride (15:1–16:14)
    - iv. Damascus/Ephraim: the way of death and the promise of life (17:1–18:7)
    - v. Egypt: one world, one people, one God (19:1–20:6)
  - b. The second series of oracles: the long night and the dawn (21–23)
    - i. The desert by the sea: the Babylon principle (21:1–10)
    - ii. Silence: days of darkness (21:11–12)
    - iii. Desert evening: Gentile needs unsolved (21:13–17)
    - iv. The Valley of Vision: the unforgivable sin (22:1–25)
    - v. Tyre: holiness to the Lord (23:1–18)
  - c. The third series: the world city and the city of God (24:1–27:13)
    - i. The city of meaninglessness (24:1–20)
    - ii. Ultimately ... the King! (24:21–23)
    - iii. Salvation and provision: the world on Mount Zion (25:1–12)
    - iv. The strong city (26:1–21)
    - v. The universal Israel (27:1–13)
- IV. THE LORD OF HISTORY (28 – 37)
  - a. The six woes (28:1–35:10)
    - i. The first woe: the word of God and the purposes of God (28:1–29)
    - ii. The second woe: is anything too hard for the Lord? (29:1–14)
    - iii. The third woe: spiritual transformation (29:15–24)
    - iv. The fourth woe: faithlessness and faithfulness (30:1–33)
    - v. The fifth woe: all things new (31:1–32:20)
    - vi. The sixth woe: home at last (33:1–35:10)
  - b. Epilogue: the rock of history (36:1–37:38)
    - i. The first Assyrian embassy: the helpless king (36:1–37:7)
    - ii. The second Assyrian embassy: the godly king (37:8–35)

- iii. The finale: Assyrian overthrow (37:36–38)

### **THE BOOK OF THE SERVANT (38-55)**

#### **V. HEZEKIAH AND THE WAY OF FAITH: THE DECISIVE SIN (38:1 – 8)**

- a. One prayer, two answers (38:1–8)
- b. Death and life (38:9–22)
- c. The moment of decision (39:1–8)

#### **VI. UNIVERSAL CONSOLATION (40:1 – 42:17)**

- a. Consolation for the Lord's people (40:1–41:20)
  - i. The message of comfort (40:1–11)
  - ii. God the Creator, guarantor of his promises (40:12–31)
  - iii. God the world ruler, guarantor of his promises (41:1–7)
  - iv. Three pictures: guaranteed consolations (41:8–20)
- b. Gentile hope (41:21–42:17)
  - i. Summoned before the court: the plight of the Gentile world (41:21–29)
  - ii. The Servant: the great solution (42:1–9)
  - iii. Singing world, saving Lord (42:10–17)

#### **VII. THE LORD'S PLAN UNFOLDED (42:18 – 44:23)**

- a. Israel's bondage and liberation (42:18–42:21)
  - i. The blind servant (42:18–25)
  - ii. Unchanged divine care (43:1–7)
  - iii. No other God: sure promises (43:8–13)
  - iv. A new exodus: the problem of bondage solved (43:14–21)
- b. Israel's sin and redemption (43:22–44:23)
  - i. Diagnosis (43:22–24)
  - ii. Remedy (43:25–44:5)
  - iii. No other God: sure promises (44: 6–20)
  - iv. Redemption from sin (44:21–23)

#### **VIII. THE GREAT DELIVERANCE: THE WORK OF CYRUS (44:24 – 48:22)**

- a. Cyrus: builder and conqueror (44:24–45:8)
  - i. The Lord and his word (44:24–26b)
  - ii. The Lord and his purpose (44:26c–28)
  - iii. The Lord and his anointed (45:1–7)
  - iv. The Lord and his created resolve (45:8)
- b. Rebellion and resolve, quibbling and consolation (45:9–46:13)
  - i. The potter and the parent (45:9–13)
  - ii. An unchanged worldwide purpose for Israel (45:14–25)
  - iii. The unchanging Lord and his stubborn rebels (46:1–13)
- c. Free at last (47:1–48:22)
  - i. Pride before a fall (47:1–15)
  - ii. Home, yet not home (48:1–22)

#### **IX. THE GREATER DELIVERANCE: THE WORK OF THE SERVANT (49 – 55)**

- a. The Servant's double task (49:1–6)
  - i. The first testimony: Israel as it was meant to be (49:1–3)
  - ii. The second testimony: the Agent, the task and the result (49:4–6)
- b. Divine confirmation: worldwide success (49:7–13)
- c. Nation and Servant, a contrast: unresponding and responding (49:14–50:11)
- d. Salvation in prospect: the watching remnant (51:1–52:12)
  - i. Commands to listen: promises of salvation (51:1–8)

- ii. A dramatic appeal: exodus past and future (51:9–11)
- iii. Interlude: a final briefing (51:12–16)
- iv. Commands to respond: what the Lord has done (51:17–52:12)
- e. Worldwide salvation (52:13–55:13)
  - i. The triumph of the Servant (52:13–53:12)
  - ii. The great invitation (54:1–55:13)

### **THE BOOK OF THE CONQUEROR (56 – 66)**

#### **X. THE IDEAL AND THE ACTUAL: THE LORD’S NEEDY, UNDERACHIEVING PEOPLE (56:1 – 59:13)**

- a. The waiting people (56:1–8)
- b. The divided people (56:9–57:21)
  - i. The failure of the leaders (56:9–57:21)
  - ii. The prostitute’s brood and the Lord’s household (57:1–21)
- c. The Sabbath people (58:1–14)
- d. The guilty people (59:1–13)
  - i. Accusations (59:1–4)
  - ii. Descriptions (59:5–8)
  - iii. Confessions (59:9–13)

#### **XI. THE PROMISED CONQUEROR: VENGEANCE AND SALVATION (59:21 – 60:22)**

- a. Preface: situation and remedy (59:14–20)
- b. The Covenant Mediator and his achievement (59:21–60:22)
  - i. The Covenant Mediator (59:21)
  - ii. The universal city (60:1–22)
- c. The Anointed One and his transforming work (61:1–9)
  - i. First testimony of the Anointed One: transformation (61:1–4)
  - ii. Transformation confirmed (61:5–9)
- d. The Savior and his gathered people (61:10–62:12)
  - i. Second testimony: acceptance of the role of Savior (61:10–62:7)
  - ii. The Lord’s oath, summons and proclamation (62:8–12)
- e. The consummation: the Anointed One completes his task (63:1–6)

#### **XII. THE NEW HEAVEN AND NEW EARTH: PRAYERS AND PROMISES (63:7 – 66:24)**

- a. A ‘remembrancer’ at prayer (63:7–64:12)
  - i. Remembering (63:7–14)
  - ii. Asking (63:15–64:12)
- b. The Lord responding: sure promises, coming consummation (65:1–66:24)
  - i. Pleading and provocation (65:1–10)
  - ii. Contrasting destinies (65:11–16)
  - iii. All things new (65:17–25)
  - iv. Judgment and hope (66:1–24)

### **Analysis of Isaiah:**

### **THE BOOK OF THE KING (1–37)**

#### **I. BACKDROP TO THE MINISTRY OF ISAIAH: THE AUTHOR’S PREFACE (1-5)**

- a. Heading (1:1)

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

The Hebrew word rendered “vision” is *chazown*, which as the English word implies, means something that is seen or perceived, in this case particularly mentally. It speaks of insight as well as sight. The word is less common than one would expect in the Bible. In The Book of Second Chronicles it is used to designate the whole Book of Isaiah. We read: “The other events of Hezekiah’s reign and his acts of devotion are written in the vision of the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel.”<sup>1</sup>

Bible scholars have argued about the question whether the title pertains to the whole book or only to the first chapter, whether part of it was added later by Isaiah or by another person or was in the original text. It is obvious that Isaiah addressed more than Judah and Jerusalem alone. As *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “Other nations also are the subjects of his prophecies, but only in their relation to the Jews (Isa 13-23); so also the Ten tribes of Israel are introduced only in the same relation (Isa 7-9).” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states: “The prophecy contained in this first chapter stands single and unconnected, making an entire piece of itself. It contains a severe remonstrance against the corruptions prevailing among the Jews of that time, powerful exhortations to repentance, grievous threatenings to the impenitent, and gracious promises of better times, when the nation shall have been reformed by the just judgments of God. The expression, upon the whole, is clear; the connection of the several parts easy; and in regard to the images, sentiments, and style, it gives a beautiful example of the prophet’s elegant manner of writing; though perhaps it may not be equal in these respects to many of the following prophecies.”

J. Alec Motyer, in his commentary on Isaiah, writes: “As the book of Isaiah has come to us, chapters 1-5 form a distinct section – like a ‘preface’ to Isaiah’s collected prophecies. This is apparent for four reasons. (a) The precise dating of chapter 6 contrasts with the undated oracles in 1:2 – 5:30. Specific events must, of course, have prompted these oracles, but Isaiah did not find it necessary to state them. (b) What we call ‘chapter 6,’ the prophet’s call, is well suited to form chapter 1 of the book, following the ‘author’s preface’ (cf. Je. 1:4–19; Ezk. 1:1 – 3:27; although, since the call of Amos is not noted until Amos 7:10–17, this is not a decisive factor. (c) Apart from the illustrative reference to the Philistines in 2:6, no foreign nations are named – not even the threatened super-conqueror of 5:25–30 – and this increases the sense that these chapters offer general truths designed to form a backdrop to the ‘main’ content of the book. (d) Chapters 1 – 5 are coherently structured with a progressive message. The unexpected heading at 2:1 indicates a fresh beginning, and the matching passages 2:2–4 and 4:2–6 form a bracket or *inclusio* ... making them a distinct section. In this way 1:2–31 and 5:1–30 are also marked off as separate divisions of the prefatory chapters.”

About the period covered by Isaiah’s prophecy, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “Isaiah ministered within the fifty-year period between the death of Uzziah (1:1; 6:1, probably 739 BC), and that of Hezekiah (1:1, 686 BC). This was also the great period of Assyrian imperialism initiated by Tiglath-Pileser III (Pul, 2 Ki. 15:19) in 745 BC.”

- b. A comprehensive failure (1:2–31)
  - i. The national situation (1:2– 9)

**2 Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.**

**3 The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."**

**4 Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.**

**5 Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted.**

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1. II Chron. 32:32

**6 From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness — only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil.**

**7 Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.**

**8 The Daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a field of melons, like a city under siege.**

**9 Unless the LORD Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.**

Isaiah opens his prophecy with the words Moses used in his grand final address to the nation of Israel before they entered Canaan: “Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.”<sup>1</sup> But the words are not Isaiah’s; they are spoken by God, whom Isaiah calls “the Holy One of Israel.” This is the main title Isaiah uses for God throughout the book. It occurs twenty-five times.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: “Isaiah sets this three-part analysis of the contemporary scene as if in a court of law. In verse 2ab the witnesses are called, in verses 2c–23 the charges are laid and in verses 24–30 sentence is pronounced. Behind the observable facts Isaiah discerns the hidden causes: rebellion against the Lord (2d) as the root of national calamity (5); personal guilt vitiating religious practice (15); social degeneration through abandonment of revealed norms of *justice* and *righteousness* (21). All this gives color to a comparison with Sodom (9–10) and builds a case for divine punitive action (5, 20, 24, 29, 29–31), but typically of Isaiah, there is also a surprise: hope is affirmed. The Lord has not left his people (9); when he acts it will also be to purge and restore (25–26), and the very *justice* and *righteousness* they abandoned (21) will be affirmed in a divine work of redemption (27).”

Heaven and earth are addressed, rather than Israel itself, but the words are spoken in Israel’s hearing for the purpose of making them understand the gravity of the accusation. Heaven and earth, taken in this context, are impersonal entities. God calls them up as witnesses. They are the ones that reveal the glory of the Creator. The Apostle Paul wrote: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”<sup>2</sup> Even fallen creation testifies to God’s glory.

Israel had been chosen to manifest a different facet of God’s glory, the glory of God’s character as Lord and Redeemer. When God revealed His glory to Moses and passed by him, He revealed Himself with the words: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”<sup>3</sup> That was the aspect of the divine character Israel had been chosen to reveal in this world and that is what they had failed to do.

As children inherit their features from their parents, so Israel had been chosen to inherit God’s features for the redemption of this world. In rebelling against God they rebelled against their own nature.

In the examples of the ox and the donkey, the point of comparison is the manger. The lower part of creation recognizes the source of its sustenance. The domesticated animal knows where to find its food. God had fed and reared Israel, but they failed to recognize the most important element that secured their existence. They had been taught “that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”<sup>4</sup> As bread feeds the body so the Word of the Lord is man’s soul food. Failure to

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1. Deut. 32:1
  2. Rom. 1:20
  3. Ex. 34:6,7
  4. Deut. 8:3

recognize this leads to spiritual starvation. In the New Testament this truth is expounded more deeply. It is not by accident that Isaiah uses the word “manger” in his illustration. We read that when Mary gave birth to the Son of God, “She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger.”<sup>1</sup> In preaching to the Jews, Jesus spoke words that reveal to us the importance of Isaiah’s statement: “I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”<sup>2</sup> If we reject this truth we side with Israel in going against the very nature of our being.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on this section: “Thus, the ‘preface’ can be summarized as follows. First is the heading (1:1). Then 1:2-31 is roundly condemnatory of what the Lord’s sons have become: rebellious (2), corrupt (4), chastened (5-6), shattered (7-8), religiously unacceptable (10-15) and degenerated (21-23). This is not, however, the whole story: for the Lord had not abandoned (9) and will not abandon (25-28) his people. Nevertheless, the beginning of the preface is effectively a declaration that ‘You are not what you ought to have been.’”

We may assume that the first five chapters of Isaiah’s prophecy were given during the reign of King Uzziah<sup>3</sup> who reigned from approximately 783-731 BC. His reign was marked by prosperity and power. Judah experienced its greatest affluence since the days of King Solomon during Uzziah’s regime. As long as the king was under the influence of the priest Zechariah, he followed the Lord. After the death of his mentor Uzziah became proud and decided to enter the temple to burn incense himself, acting as a priest. God struck him with leprosy and he spent the last twelve years of his life in confinement. It was probably during this period that Isaiah prophesied the words we find in the first five chapters of his book.

During this period of affluence and political power Judah disregarded the call God had placed upon them as a nation. It was at this time that a very severe earthquake hit Palestine. This earthquake was so devastating that the people still knew about it in Zechariah’s time, about 200 years later.<sup>4</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* notes: “Josephus likewise embodies a tradition that the earthquake occurred at the moment of the king’s entry into the temple (Ant. IX, x, 4). Indubitably the name of Uzziah was associated in the popular mind with this earthquake. If the prophecy of Amos was uttered a year or two before Jeroboam’s death, and this is placed in 759 BC, we are brought near to the date already given for Uzziah’s leprosy.”

Isaiah’s words in v.5 “Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion?” could very well refer to this earthquake, but we can only speculate about this.

In Israel’s history books, Uzziah’s reign may have been marked as one of the golden ages, but in God’s annals it was the time during which “they have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him” (v.4b). In the Netherlands where I grew up, I learned in school that Holland’s golden age was the eighteenth century, when Holland knew its greatest prosperity. In reality it was the age of fool’s gold. It was the time in which Dutch ships brought spices and other exotic items from the Indies and the basis of colonialism was laid; the age the slave trade with the Americas began. Holland’s golden age was in sixteenth century when people were burned at the stake because they read the Bible. Israel’s golden age was in the days of Joshua and David, who were men after God’s own heart.

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1. Luke 2:7
  2. John 6:32,33,35,51
  3. II Kings 15:1-8 and II Chron. 26
  4. See Zech. 14:5.

Isaiah describes Israel as Jesus depicted the man who was attacked by robbers on the way to Jericho.<sup>1</sup> Israel resembled the Christians in Laodicea about whom Jesus would say centuries later: “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”<sup>2</sup>

We note that the prophet describes the whole nation as one single person, as a whole body. Judah is sick from top to toe, in the head as well as in the heart. From the beginning of creation, God has treated mankind as being one person, as either being “in Adam,” or “in Christ.” God administered corporal punishment to those He loved so they would be saved from spiritual destruction. As *The Book of Proverbs* states: “Wounds from a friend can be trusted”<sup>3</sup> and: “Blows and wounds cleanse away evil, and beatings purge the inmost being.”<sup>4</sup>

If vv.2-5 describe the moral condition of the people, vv.6-9 speak of the landscape. There is no indication that Judah was attacked and devastated at that time in the way Isaiah portrays here. Some Bible scholars, however, believe that Judah may, at that point, not yet have recovered from the attacks of Syria and Israel under Uzziah’s predecessors Joash and Amaziah. But it seems more likely that Isaiah places himself prophetically in the future and speaks about what the country will look like during the Babylonian captivity. In painting a picture of what will happen to their country if the people do not turn to the Lord in time, Isaiah issues a warning and a call for repentance. If this supposition is correct, the people may have reacted to Isaiah’s picture with unbelief and scorn, much like Noah’s contemporaries who could not understand why Noah built a ship on dry land, or Lot’s sons-in-law who thought their father-in-law was joking when he announced the destruction of Sodom.<sup>5</sup> Isaiah’s painting makes us think of Germany at the end of World War II: bombed-out cities and scorched earth.

The shelter in a vineyard and the hut in a field of melons paint a dismal picture of Judah’s future condition. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: “Vineyards required to be watched for a few weeks only as the fruit began to ripen; and the watchers, or keepers, built themselves, therefore, mere ‘booths’ for their protection ... These were frail, solitary dwellings — very forlorn, very helpless. Such was now Jerusalem ... Cucumber-gardens required watching throughout the season, *i.e.* from spring to autumn, and their watcher needed a more solid edifice than a booth.” The sad part of the image is that the harvest is destroyed and the booth that was erected to protect it, that ramshackle little structure, is the only thing remaining as a symbol of futility. The booth does not depict Jerusalem, as *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests, but *The Daughter of Zion*, that is the people. People who do not put God at the center of their lives reduce themselves to meaninglessness and futility.

In v.9 the prophet reminds us, not only of the story of destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but of Abraham’s intercession. The “survivors” are the ten righteous that were lacking in Abraham’s day. In his intercessory prayer for Sodom, Abraham said: “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there? And God answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”<sup>6</sup>

Isaiah calls for intercessors, people who are the spiritual army to defend the land. When Elisha saw his mentor Elijah go to heaven, he cried: “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”<sup>7</sup> Elijah’s ascension left Israel without defense. After World War I, which people believed to be “the war to

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1. Luke 20:30

2. Rev. 3:17

3. Prov. 27:6

4. Prov. 20:30

5. See Gen. 19:14.

6. Gen. 18:32

7. II Kings 2:12

end all wars,” some people formed a group called “Spiritual and Moral Rearmament.” In these verses Isaiah calls for that kind of mobilization.

ii. The religious situation (1:10– 20)

**10 Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah!**

**11 "The multitude of your sacrifices — what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.**

**12 When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?**

**13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations — I cannot bear your evil assemblies.**

**14 Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.**

**15 When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood;**

**16 wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong,**

**17 learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.**

**18 "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.**

**19 If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land;**

**20 but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.**

In the previous verse, Isaiah had compared the people to Sodom and Gomorrah after their destruction; here he compares them to those cities before the Lord turned them upside-down. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah demonstrated itself in sexual perversion. The sin of Judah was perversion on a different level. Scripture consistently calls spiritual infidelity adultery. What Sodom did sexually, Judah did spiritually: they maintained an outward resemblance of piety without communion with God. Judah treated God as the heathen people treated their idols, as deities against which they had to defend themselves, who had to be pacified with blood. They were like husbands who buy expensive jewelry for their wives while having affairs with other women.

Some Bible scholars have drawn the wrong conclusion of what Isaiah says in these verses. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: “These verses have been the center of a difference of opinion. Some note how in verse 11 the Lord denies the significance of sacrifices, in verse 12 their divine authorization, and in verse 13 issues commands to end them. On this view, Isaiah is calling for ‘morality without religion,’ an ethically focused walk with God devoid of ritual observance. But it can be questioned whether this understanding is true to Isaiah. Is it likely that he was so revolutionary as to repudiate the tradition in which he had been nurtured and which he would have traced back to Moses? Such a conclusion would require more than the ‘say so’ of a brief passage like this! Furthermore, if the passage repudiated temple rites, then it repudiates equally the Sabbath (13) and prayer (15)! Rather, Isaiah invites us to recall that in the Mosaic system redeeming grace (Ex. 6:6-7; 12:13), the gift of the law (Ex. 20) and the forms of religious observance (Ex. 25 – Lv. 27) followed one another in that order as parts of a single whole. The law was given so that those who had already been redeemed by the blood of the lamb would know how their Redeemer (Ex. 20:2) wished them to live.”

It is obvious that God, by the mouth of Isaiah, did not repudiate all sacrificial rituals. Isaiah says here the same that David says in one of his psalms: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears

you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.' <sup>1</sup> Quoting David's psalm, the author of The Epistle to the Hebrews adds: "First he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them' (*although the law required them to be made*).<sup>2</sup> Then he said, 'Here I am, I have come to do your will.' He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."<sup>3</sup> The problem was not in the sacrifices but in the people's attitude toward them. The people regarded their sacrifices and observances as bribes, as efforts to soften God's anger. They did not identify themselves with the sacrifice they brought. Every person bringing a sacrificial animal had to put his hand on the animal's head as if he stated that what happened to the animal happened to him by substitution. In the ritual he expressed his belief that he ought to die, but the animal took his place on the altar. Without such identification the sacrifice becomes an abomination.

If that was the case in the Old Testament ritual of sacrifices, how much more is this pertinent in the New Testament where "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." The cross of Jesus Christ remains an abominable instrument of torture unless we confess: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."<sup>4</sup> God hates the cross unless we identify with Jesus Christ who took our place on it. This means that we confess that God was right when He condemned us to death, that we accept the verdict and submit to it.

Judah's failure to identify with the sacrifices also made their prayers meaningless. God says: "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen." Without our identification with Jesus' sacrifice the addition to our prayers of "in Jesus' Name" becomes an idle ritual. God does not hear our prayers simply because we use the right words. He only hears us when we take up our cross and follow His Son.

Identification with Jesus' death also means that we do the right thing. Judah's wrong concept of the meaning of sacrifices had brought them in the camp of God's enemy. They had become murderers and oppressors. When God said to Noah: "And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man"<sup>5</sup> He seemed to say that killing of animals, except for sacrifice or food was considered murder of the same kind as killing man. The blood the men of Judah had on their hands was both human and animal blood. The only way to clean the blood of their hands was by the blood of the lambs of their sacrifices. They may not have physically killed orphans and widows, but God considers hatred and lack of compassion tantamount to murder.

V.18 is one of the most outstanding means of evangelism. God sends sinners a court order, a summons to appear before Him in order to work matters out. The Hebrew verb translated "reason" is *yakach*, which has a wide variety of meanings. It can mean: "to argue," "to justify or convict," "to plead," "to reason," "to rebuke," etc. The first time this verb is used in the Old Testament is in the case of Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech. Abraham had said that Sarah was his sister instead of his wife. That was a half-truth that got Abimelech into serious trouble when he tried to make Sarah one of the ladies in his harem. When God told Abimelech the full truth, we read: "Then Abimelech brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, 'My land is before you; live wherever you like.' To Sarah he said, 'I am giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver.

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1. Ps. 40:6-8
  2. The italics are mine.
  3. Heb. 10:8-10
  4. Gal. 2:20
  5. Gen. 9:5

This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; *you are completely vindicated.*' ”<sup>1</sup> In a human court of law in most countries an accused person is considered innocent till proven guilty. Pleading “not guilty” to a charge makes conviction impossible, unless sufficient proof can be provided to prove the plea false. A human judge and jury never know all the facts unless they are clearly demonstrated. The omniscient God knows all the fact. Our plea makes no difference for Him in the case. The convocation to court, therefore, is not for proof of guilt, but for settlement. The settlement is “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.”

None of the sacrifices mentioned earlier produced any settlement in court or out of court because they had been paid in the wrong way and put on the wrong account. Sinners had brought sacrificial animals to pacify God, not realizing that all animals belong to God to begin with. This made their sacrifices both stealing and murder. They stole an animal from God, killed it and used it for their own purposes, all the time denying their guilt. The settlement God proposes is that He brings the sacrifice if we confess to be guilty and worthy of capital punishment. The only way scarlet sin can become white as snow is by the blood of Christ. Billy Graham once told that he had to appear in court because of a speeding ticket. The judge declared him guilty and set the fine; then turning around the judge paid it himself. God does not fine us for our sin; He condemns us to death and then dies in our stead.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes that snow and wool are both naturally white, they are not made so by bleaching. He states: “The promise, therefore, is of a new, holy nature, not just the cleansing away of the past.”

There seems to be some inconsistency between the earlier statement in vv.15 and 16: “Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean” and the cleansing God offers in v.18. The only way for us to wash our hands is to have God wash our heart.

It is interesting to observe that God sees human sin in terms of scarlet and crimson, both are the color red. We tend to describe sin as black. God looks beyond the black to the red that, in the Old Testament covered sin and in the New Testament washes it away.

Scarlet was made by the crushing of a worm that lives in the Near East. *The Easton's Bible Dictionary* states about scarlet: “This dye was obtained by ... the Hebrews from the *Coccus ilicis*, an insect which infests oak trees, called kermes by the Arabians.” The whole picture speaks of death and atonement.

Snow is known in Israel, although the climate is generally moderate. Mount Hermon and the Lebanon mountains are snow-covered, some peaks all year long. Freshly fallen snow is a symbol of virgin purity. The promise of God to make our heart “white as snow” goes beyond cleansing upon confession of sin, as we understand it. What God had in mind was what the Apostle Paul describes as: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”<sup>2</sup>

The condition for this kind of cleansing to perfection is being willing and obedient, both characteristic for the surrender of the bride to the bridegroom. The result of such surrender is given in terms of eating the best from the land. When Israel settled into Canaan, God said to them: “So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.”<sup>3</sup> At the time of Isaiah's prophecy Israel had inhabited the Promised Land for approximately seven centuries. We assume therefore that “eating the best of the land” does not refer to what the soil produced; it refers to a spiritual experience of God's promises. In Psalm Thirty-Seven, David mentions the spiritual conditions required for “living in the land,” meaning inhabiting the place of God's blessing. Jesus widened the perspective in His *Sermon on the Mount* by saying: “Blessed are the meek, for

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1. Gen. 20:14-16  
 2. Eph. 5:25-27  
 3. Josh. 24:13

they will inherit the earth.”<sup>1</sup> The intent is that God will restore human royal dignity to those who obey His commands.

iii. The social situation and its consequences (1:21– 31)

***21 See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her — but now murderers!***

***22 Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water.***

***23 Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them.***

***24 Therefore the Lord, the LORD Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel, declares: "Ah, I will get relief from my foes and avenge myself on my enemies.***

***25 I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities.***

***26 I will restore your judges as in days of old, your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City."***

***27 Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness.***

***28 But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the LORD will perish.***

***29 "You will be ashamed because of the sacred oaks in which you have delighted; you will be disgraced because of the gardens that you have chosen.***

***30 You will be like an oak with fading leaves, like a garden without water.***

***31 The mighty man will become tinder and his work a spark; both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire."***

The image in this section is of a city and a woman combined in one. The picture is a piece of rich poetry, sparkling in colors dark and deep, bright and brilliant. Apart from some preliminary figures of speech in *The Book of Psalms*, we can say that Isaiah is the first prophet who speaks of man's fellowship with God in terms of a city and a bride. The picture finds its consummation in *The Book of Revelation* where John describes the bride of Christ as The New Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

Israel's position in God's plan of salvation, as a kingdom of priests, reflects what God has in mind for all of humanity. God wants us to be wedded to Him in a legal relationship of love and joy. Human married bliss is a vague reflection of this ultimate reality.

Isaiah's focus is on Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom of Judah. Earlier in this chapter he called the city Sodom and Gomorrah. Again in Revelation, John uses the same image in his description of the Great Tribulation under the rule of the Antichrist. We read: "Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified."<sup>3</sup> It is impossible to miss the point.

Jerusalem, which was meant to be God's faithful bride, has become a prostitute. In apocalyptic terms, Jerusalem has become Babylon. We could object that Israel was never the pure virgin God wanted for Himself. As in the message of Hosea who was married to the prostitute Gomer, God indulged, humanly speaking, in wishful thinking. In the days of Joshua and David, the Israelites were generally more faithful in their fellowship with God, but they never reached the level of perfect submission and dedication that is the prerequisite of a marriage made in heaven. In the present, though God sees us as perfect in Christ, we know that in reality we are far from His ideal.

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1. Matt. 5:5

2. Rev. 21:2

3. Rev. 11:8

Jerusalem, Israel, the church has, like the church of Ephesus, forsaken her first love.<sup>1</sup> As in prostitution “love” is sold for money, so in our day religion has become profitable business. But the situation was much worse than failure to measure up to God’s perfect standard; Jerusalem was ruled by murderers.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states about this section: “*Faithful city ... harlot*: only here and in 23:15-18 does Isaiah use the metaphor of sexual infidelity. Everything else followed in a downward spiral from this basic failure to live as a faithful wife with the Lord. Isaiah notes, first, the breakdown of moral ideals: *justice* and *righteousness*. Rooted in the divine holiness (5:16), *righteousness* embodies holiness in sound principles and *justice* expresses righteousness in sound precepts. Secondly, he observes the breakdown of moral relationships: *murderers*. When commitment to the Lord goes, breaching the ‘first table’ of the law (harlotry), the breach of the ‘second table’ follows (murder). Social values cannot be created and maintained without spiritual commitment.”

The same thought, although in reversed order, seems to be expressed in v.22. Silver was the monetary unit that ruled the business of daily life; wine was the component that represented enjoyment of life. Wine was often used as an image of spiritual values or as a comparison with things spiritual. (You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound).<sup>2</sup> Silver was put in a crucible to purify it of its dross. The purified silver represented value, the dross was thrown away. Jerusalem had exchanged its moral values for garbage and spiritually it had deluded its relationship with God to the point where it had lost all its vigor and potency. The Apostle Paul speaks of people who are “having a form of godliness but denying its power.”<sup>3</sup>

The following verse reveals that the prophet speaks primarily about people in authority. If our supposition that this part of the book pertains to the reign of King Uzziah, the king who had restored prosperity and respectability to the nation of Judah, these verses must be seen as an indictment of Judah’s spiritual and social condition at that time. The people may have thought that they were living the good life; God considers them as feeding on garbage. Government corruption was eating away on the principles of social justice. Those in power enriched themselves at the expense of the underprivileged.

Vv.24 and 25 announce the coming of God’s day of judgment, the day of vengeance. Isaiah uses the names “Lord, LORD of hosts,” *Adoni, Yahweh Tsabaoth*. These names are meant to remind the rulers under whose authority they rule. The Lord is the Commander in Chief, the One by whose grace they reign and to whom they have to give account. He is “the Mighty One of Israel,” the ultimate source of power. Rulers who are not “plugged in” to this power source are meaningless figureheads. They are the dross of the nation. God calls them “my foes” and “my enemies.”

These people had lost all sense of perspective. They considered themselves to be powerful and to be able to do as they pleased. They thought that God would stand in awe of them and be pleased if they paid attention to Him. It is reported that General Douglas MacArthur, commander of the American army in the Pacific during World War II, once commented on Amos’s prophecy: “Prepare to meet your God,”<sup>4</sup> that he was prepared to meet God, but he was not sure if God was prepared to meet him! The rulers’ attitude is exemplified in King Uzziah’s arrogance that made him enter the temple to sacrifice an offering of incense.<sup>5</sup>

We would expect the announcement of judgment to end in punishment and total destruction. Having compared Jerusalem with Sodom and Gomorrah, we would believe the city to become another Dead Sea. But the discipline God metes out to His people is a chastisement that leads to sanctification. When God removes the dross, the final product is pure as a shining precious metal. When God is through with the Old Jerusalem it will be the New Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the city that kills its prophets and stones those God

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1. See Rev. 2:4.
  2. Ps. 4:7
  3. II Tim. 3:5
  4. See Amos 4:12b.
  5. II Chron. 26:16-20

sends,<sup>1</sup> the city that “is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified,”<sup>2</sup> will become the bride of the Lamb. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states here: “In this quiet way [Isaiah] introduces a theme which will become increasingly dominant in his book.” Sodom will “be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City.”

Vv.27-31 describe the process of purification. Since Jerusalem did not possess and practice justice and righteousness, these qualities come to her from outside; they are imputed to her. We find in these verses the first shadows of the cross. The Gospel, as it is revealed in the New Testament, is a Gospel of righteousness. As the Apostle Paul states: “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed.”<sup>3</sup> God punished man’s sin in laying the burden on His Son when He died on the cross. The penitent, he who confesses to be a sinner, will be redeemed by that substitution.

The announcement of judgment also contains a call for decision. To the penitent righteousness will be imputed; those who persist in their rebellion will perish. Isaiah uses two Hebrew words to describe the unrighteous. The “rebel,” *pasha*, is the one who breaks away from the Lord, who severs the relationship. The “sinner,” *chatta* is a criminal, one who is pronounced guilty on the basis of the acts he has committed. Appropriately, the first time that word is used in the Bible is in connection with the men of Sodom. We read: “Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD.”<sup>4</sup>

The last three verses of this chapter describe the process of disintegration of both the idols and the idolaters. The sacred oaks and the gardens were obviously the places where people practiced their idol worship. When the Northern Kingdom was led into captivity to Assyria, the Bible records: “The Israelites secretly did things against the LORD their God that were not right. From watchtower to fortified city they built themselves high places in all their towns. They set up sacred stones and Asherah poles on every high hill and under every spreading tree. At every high place they burned incense, as the nations whom the LORD had driven out before them had done. They did wicked things that provoked the LORD to anger.”<sup>5</sup>

The king of Assyria destroyed the cities and burned down the forests. As the trees withered so did the souls of those who had worshipped there. What happened to the object of their worship, happened to them. In the first Psalm we read the description of the person who loves and obeys the Lord: “He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”<sup>6</sup> Those who identify with the Lord of glory will share in that glory. The idolater will burn with his idol. Those who turn to garbage gods will turn into trash.

### c. The ideal lost and found (2:1 – 4:6)

#### i. Heading (2:1)

#### ***1 This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:***

Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this part with: “In the second ‘movement’ of his preface ... Isaiah’s review of the contemporary scene (2:5 – 4:1) covers much of the ground surveyed in 1:2–31. Isaiah 2:5–21 concentrates on the religious situation and the failure of the false gods; 3:1 – 4:1 reviews the collapse of ordered society because of underlying moral failure. The bracket or inclusio around this is formed by two beautiful poems, beginning with what Zion was meant to be (2:2–4) and ending with what Zion will yet be (4:2–6). Chapters 2 – 4 match chapter 1 not only in content but also in underlying philosophy. The work of man is always unto destruction, with an apparent inevitability: objectives like making money (2:7ab), or security through armaments (2:7cd), contribute as much to the coming day of judgment as do making and

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1. See Luke 13:34.
  2. Rev. 11:8
  3. Rom. 1:17
  4. Gen. 13:13
  5. II Kings 17:9-11
  6. Ps. 1:3

worshipping false gods (2:8); humankind's best endeavors to construct a secure society come under divine 'deconstruction' (3:1-7) because of the unrecognized seriousness of sins of speech (3:8), and what might be thought of as the harmless luxury of a well-furnished wardrobe (3:16-23) in fact reflects frivolous and worldly vain-gloriousness. But the Lord is never nonplussed. Zion comes under inescapable wrath but Zion will be redeemed. The Lord will yet realize the ideal which his people corrupted."

About the "heading" of this chapter, Motyer observes: "The easiest explanation of this unexpected 'heading' is that what we call chapters 2 - 4 once 'circulated' as a separate 'book' or even as a 'wall-newspaper'."

- ii. The great 'might have been' (2:2-4)

***2 In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.***

***3 Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.***

***4 He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.***

In the midst of the judgments pronounced in this book, the "poem" comes as a breath of fresh air, as a sunbeam breaking through dark thunderclouds. This "millennial view" of what God intends Judah and Jerusalem to be ought to be enough for each of us to take up our cross and march toward the joy that is before us.<sup>1</sup>

It must be noted that these verses are identical to Micah 4:1-3, to which *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "The resemblance of this prophecy to ... Micah 4:1-3 is so close as to necessitate the conclusion either that one of the two prophets copied from the other, or that both copied from an earlier document." J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "This use of this poem in Micah 4:1-4 raises the question which prophet 'copied' from the other or whether both quoted an existing hymn. The passage is equally 'at home' in each context, but possibly the variations in wording suggest that Micah's version is a free quotation."

"The mountain of the LORD," which is the topic of this poem, is Mount Zion. The place on earth that goes by that name hardly qualifies as a mountain. We do not know exactly how high Zion was in Isaiah's day. Present-day Jerusalem lies approximately 2500 feet above sea level, but earth's crust may have shifted over time. At best Mount Zion is a good sized hill. In Isaiah's prophecy it surpasses Mount Everest in importance. Zion's height is first of all spiritual because of the presence of the Lord.

To continue the comparison, the people of Nepal are well aware of the importance of the mountain in their backyard. It makes them the main attraction to the world's mountain climbers. The inhabitants of Jerusalem seem to have been totally oblivious to the presence of the place that made them the center of the world. We learned in the previous chapter that their attention was on their sacred oaks and the gardens in which they committed idolatry. The whole world will one day wake up to the fact that the Jews have something that is the desire of all mankind. This Judah ignored.

This fact makes Isaiah's poem a wake-up call like the blast of a trumpet. This is pure Gospel music. *The Pulpit Commentary* calls "The mountain of the Lord's house": "The Church, the true Zion, which is to be the antitype of the existing Zion, and is therefore given its material attributes. Spiritually, it would be a 'mountain,' as 'a city set on a hill,' which 'could not be hid' (...Matthew 5:14); and again, as occupying a position from which it would command the whole earth."

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1. See Heb. 12:2.

Although it is legitimate to draw New Testament spiritual lessons from Old Testament prophecy, our blessing tends to deepen if we place the text, first of all, in its contemporary setting. Isaiah reminds his people that God had called them to be a kingdom of priests, representatives of God in a lost world, a bridge between heaven and earth. They have the secret that, if applied universally, will be the end of all human warfare. This is expressed in an unsurpassed way in the words “They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” The only way this can happen is by a radical transformation of sinful human nature into a new creation in Jesus Christ. He is, in the words of the prophet Daniel, “a rock ... cut out, but not by human hands. [That] struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. ... But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.”<sup>1</sup>

iii. The actual Jerusalem – part one (2:5– 21)

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

***6 You have abandoned your people, the house of Jacob. They are full of superstitions from the East; they practice divination like the Philistines and clasp hands with pagans.***

***7 Their land is full of silver and gold; there is no end to their treasures. Their land is full of horses; there is no end to their chariots.***

***8 Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their fingers have made.***

***9 So man will be brought low and mankind humbled — do not forgive them.***

***10 Go into the rocks, hide in the ground from dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty!***

***11 The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.***

***12 The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled),***

***13 for all the cedars of Lebanon, tall and lofty, and all the oaks of Bashan,***

***14 for all the towering mountains and all the high hills,***

***15 for every lofty tower and every fortified wall,***

***16 for every trading ship and every stately vessel.***

***17 The arrogance of man will be brought low and the pride of men humbled; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day,***

***18 and the idols will totally disappear.***

***19 Men will flee to caves in the rocks and to holes in the ground from dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to shake the earth.***

***20 In that day men will throw away to the rodents and bats their idols of silver and idols of gold, which they made to worship.***

***21 They will flee to caverns in the rocks and to the overhanging crags from dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to shake the earth.***

This section opens with an exhortation. We could say that it is the conclusion of what follows. This kind of construction is not unusual in Hebrew poetry; we find it in some of the Psalms in which the Psalmist opens his song with a statement that formulates the lesson to follow.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section as follows: “By contrast with this exciting ideal (2–4) Isaiah now faces the harrowing actual! The exhortation (5) itself implies that the Lord’s people are not walking in his light, and verses 6–21 justify the implication in two poems: the first (6–9) asserting that blessing is impossible. The brackets/inclusio *you have abandoned* (6) ... *do not forgive* (9) speak of the alienation of the Lord and of his mercies because of three offences: conformity to the world (6), seeking worldly resources and securities (7) and worshipping man-made gods (8). The second poem (10–21) asserts

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1. See Dan. 2:34,35.

that judgment is inevitable. Closely related to verses 6–9 by the themes of human self-sufficiency (11, 17; cf. 6–7) and idolatry (20; cf. 8), this intricate poem shows how the Lord has only to reveal his glory (10) and human arrogance falls (11), the world as it reflects human pride is flattened (12–17), idols are exposed as useless (18–19) and people defenseless (20–21). There is no exceptional exercise of divine power; only the Lord displaying what he always is!”

Again we find in Isaiah’s words themes that are further developed in the New Testament. As in the previous section the prophet painted a picture of the Millennium, so here he uses expressions that describe fellowship with God in Jesus Christ. Jesus said: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”<sup>1</sup> And: “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.”<sup>2</sup> And the Apostle John writes: “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”<sup>3</sup>

The invitation to the House of Jacob to come and walk in God’s light implies that they are enveloped in spiritual darkness. Their idolatry had brought them under the power of the Prince of Darkness and their acts reflected this fact.

Walking in the light of the Lord is a spiritual exercise and experience. The image is clear to us because we know the practice of using a light in the darkness of the night to see where we are going. Fellowship with God gives us the understanding needed to know where we are and where we are heading. As physical light gives us sight so spiritual light gives us insight. The Gospel of John is the Gospel of light. John uses the word “light” at least twenty-five times in his book. Almost every time it is in connection with Jesus Christ, whom he calls “the Word.” The Psalmist sings: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.”<sup>4</sup> We walk in God’s light if we obey His Word and surrender the reins of our life to Jesus Christ.

Walking in the light also means to do what God wants us to do. As Jesus said: “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.”<sup>5</sup>

In vv.6-9 the prophet addresses God to whom he describes the people’s condition both spiritually and physically. We may assume that Isaiah understood that there was no need to pass on information to the Lord as if “the Omniscient” would be ignorant of the facts. The gist of these verses serves to trace the origin of the people’s spiritual decline. Since they refused the invitation to walk in the light, the light had left them. This is expressed in the word “therefore,” which *The New International Version* omits.

The phrase “They are full of superstitions from the East” reads literally in Hebrew: “They be full of the East.” The Hebrew word *male’* means: “to fill” or “to be full of.” We find it in the verses: “So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number and *fill* the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.’”<sup>6</sup> And also in: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was *full of violence.*”<sup>7</sup>

The text could mean that the people turned from walking in God’s light to worshipping the sun, exchanging the greater light for the lesser. It could also mean that they began to live by the principles of astrology which flourished in the east. That would link the people of Israel to the Philistines who practiced divination. God had specifically warned the Israelites against the prevailing practices of Canaan. We read in

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1. John 8:12
  2. John 12:35,36
  3. I John 1:7
  4. Ps. 119:105
  5. John 9:4
  6. Gen. 1:21,22
  7. Gen. 6:11

Deuteronomy: “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so.”<sup>1</sup>

One could argue that those who practice spiritualism at least move in the realm of the spiritual. Many people believe that there is no difference between one supernatural manifestation and another; not recognizing that one may be light and the other darkness. It is the dark supernatural that will lead to materialism. That is what the prophet describes in v.7. The people of Judah discovered that idolatry was much more profitable than serving the Lord. Satan paid the people well for their service. He treated them like someone who fattens an animal for the slaughter. When Satan said to God: “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land”<sup>2</sup> he projected his own practice upon God.

Thus Isaiah paints the picture of Judah as going from idolatry to prosperity and back to idolatry. And in v.9, he concludes: “So man will be brought low and mankind humbled — do not forgive them.” A footnote in *The New International Version* reads: “Or not raise them up.”

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments here: “The successful campaigns and mercantile operations of Uzziah had resulted in considerable economic prosperity in Judah, but this wealth had only encouraged the Jews in materialism and neglect of the God of the Bible. From such carnality of viewpoint it was an easy and natural step to idolatry and to joining with the rest of the world in ‘worshipping the creature more than the Creator.’ ... Before the most abominable idols - Baal, Ashtoreth, Milcom, Dagon, Hadad, and all the rest - both the upper classes of Judah and the common people bowed in heathenish worship. To allow this sin to go permanently unpunished would have cast the greatest discredit upon God’s cause and compromised his glory. Therefore Isaiah prayed him to vindicate his truth by punishing those who had shamelessly trampled upon it.”

The problem in v.9 is that it sounds as if the prophet does not want God to forgive Judah’s sin of idolatry. In view of the surprising prophecy of restoration in the previous chapter, that sounds out of character with the message of the whole book. J. Alex Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “The Hebrew imperative not only commands but also can be used to express an inevitable outcome, here ‘the conviction that something cannot or should not happen,’ i.e. ‘and there is no way you can forgive them.’ ” We could place Isaiah’s desperation next to Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man, where Jesus said: “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” “Those who heard this asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus replied, ‘What is impossible with men is possible with God.’ ”<sup>3</sup>

It seems as if Isaiah had heard Hosea’s prophecy: “Then they will say to the mountains, ‘Cover us!’ and to the hills, ‘Fall on us!’ ”<sup>4</sup> and that he says “amen!” to it. Since the prophets were contemporaries that is quite possible. The people who committed idolatry will be confronted with the living God and they will be gripped with terror. That panic comes from the spirits that control their lives. The reaction of demons to a confrontation with God’s glory is always panic. We see this in the Gospel. Mark tells us what happened in the synagogue of Capernaum where Jesus preached: “Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed

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1. Deut. 18:10-14
  2. See Job 1:9,10.
  3. Luke 18:24-27
  4. Hos. 10:8; Rev. 6:15-17

by an evil spirit cried out, ‘What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are — the Holy One of God!’ ”<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah describes the attitude of the idolaters as arrogant and proud. These people are confronted with the glory of God, which makes them realize the utter failure of their lives. The meaning of Paul’s definition of sin, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”<sup>2</sup> will become clear to them and they will realize the reason for their condemnation. It is the glory of God that will either transform or condemn us.

Although Isaiah uses images of trees and ships in vv.12-18, the topic is judgment upon human pride. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “It is usual to take this metaphorically; and no doubt men are often compared to trees in Scripture (... Psalm 1:3; ... Jeremiah 17:8; ... Job 8:16, 17), and ‘cedars of Lebanon’ especially are symbols of the great and proud ones (... Ezekiel 31:3). But it has been well observed that either *all* the details of the description in the text must be taken literally, or *all* of them metaphorically, and that the mention of such objects as ‘ships of Tarshish’ and ‘pleasant pictures’ pleads strongly for a literal interpretation. The day of the Lord was upon the cedars when Sennacherib ‘with chariots upon chariots came up to the height of the mountains, to the *sides of Lebanon*, and *cut down the tall cedars thereof*, and the choice fir trees thereof’ (... Isaiah 37:24); and similar devastation accompanied, it is probable, the other invasions of the Assyrians.” The fact that the trees were at one point cut down does not force us to discard them here is symbols of human pride. Also, Sennacherib’s army may have deforested the mountains and hills, they did not lower the mountains and high hills. Beside that is the fact that Isaiah may be referring here to sites that were used as places of idolatry.

It is also true that our surrounding influences our mentality and behavior. The attitude of the people of Switzerland is markedly different from that of the people in The Netherlands. The Swiss are not only rightfully proud of their mountains, they sometimes behave as if they made them themselves. The lowland-dwellers of Holland, however, live partly below sea level, both physically and emotionally: they express themselves almost exclusively in diminutives! (I know; I was born there).

V.19 points back to v.10, where Isaiah foretold what would happen on the day of the Lord. The prophet describes that day as the day “when he rises to shake the earth.” This is probably a prophecy about the devastating earthquake that also became a point of reference in the prophecies of Amos and Zechariah. We read that Amos prophesied “two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah.”<sup>3</sup> And Zechariah’s prophecy indicates that the people still knew of it 200 years later.<sup>4</sup>

But the earthquake was not the actual “Day of the Lord,” although the people may have thought it was. And they behaved as if it were the last day of our planet; they threw away their idols, confessing that they knew that they had done wrong when they worshipped them. We see again the panic caused by a vision of God’s glory for those who do not partake in that glory. A normal reaction during an earthquake is to run away from places that tend to collapse, such as caverns and overhanging crags. These people preferred to be crushed by the rocks than by the revelation of God’s glory. What God said to Moses remains true universally: “No one may see me and live.”<sup>5</sup>

iv. The actual Jerusalem – part two (2:22– 4:1)

## **22 Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?**

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1. Mark 1:23,24
  2. Rom. 3:23
  3. See Amos 1:1.
  4. See Zech. 14:5.
  5. Ex. 33:20

*Chapter 3:1 - See now, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, is about to take from Jerusalem and Judah both supply and support: all supplies of food and all supplies of water,*

*2 the hero and warrior, the judge and prophet, the soothsayer and elder,*

*3 the captain of fifty and man of rank, the counselor, skilled craftsman and clever enchanter.*

*4 I will make boys their officials; mere children will govern them.*

*5 People will oppress each other — man against man, neighbor against neighbor. The young will rise up against the old, the base against the honorable.*

*6 A man will seize one of his brothers at his father's home, and say, "You have a cloak, you be our leader; take charge of this heap of ruins!"*

*7 But in that day he will cry out, "I have no remedy. I have no food or clothing in my house; do not make me the leader of the people."*

*8 Jerusalem staggers, Judah is falling; their words and deeds are against the LORD, defying his glorious presence.*

*9 The look on their faces testifies against them; they parade their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to them! They have brought disaster upon themselves.*

*10 Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds.*

*11 Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done.*

*12 Youths oppress my people, women rule over them. O my people, your guides lead you astray; they turn you from the path.*

*13 The LORD takes his place in court; he rises to judge the people.*

*14 The LORD enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people: "It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses.*

*15 What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?" declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.*

*16 The LORD says, "The women of Zion are haughty, walking along with outstretched necks, flirting with their eyes, tripping along with mincing steps, with ornaments jingling on their ankles.*

*17 Therefore the Lord will bring sores on the heads of the women of Zion; the LORD will make their scalps bald."*

*18 In that day the Lord will snatch away their finery: the bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces,*

*19 the earrings and bracelets and veils,*

*20 the headdresses and ankle chains and sashes, the perfume bottles and charms,*

*21 the signet rings and nose rings,*

*22 the fine robes and the capes and cloaks, the purses*

*23 and mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls.*

*24 Instead of fragrance there will be a stench; instead of a sash, a rope; instead of well-dressed hair, baldness; instead of fine clothing, sackcloth; instead of beauty, branding.*

*25 Your men will fall by the sword, your warriors in battle.*

*26 The gates of Zion will lament and mourn; destitute, she will sit on the ground.*

*Chapter 4:1 - In that day seven women will take hold of one man and say, "We will eat our own food and provide our own clothes; only let us be called by your name. Take away our disgrace!"*

Isaiah's conclusion of Chapter Two is interestingly "Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?" After the scene of people throwing away their idols, we would expect the prophet to say "Stop trusting in idols!" The implication is that man believes to be in control when he worships idols. First of all, idols are manmade. Isaiah will preserve his sharpest irony about this for a later chapter. The essence of idolatry, however, is that man pacifies idols, thus limiting the damage they can do to him. He does not realize that the evil power that is behind the idol controls him.

The reference to human breath is a reminder that we have no life in ourselves. We depend on God for the very breath we take. The psalmist reminds us: "when you take away their breath, they die and return

to the dust.”<sup>1</sup> This does not make man a nobody or take away the value of human life. It is the very breath in our nostrils that makes us creatures in the image and likeness of God.<sup>2</sup>

In the next several verses of this chapter there is a play-on-words that is difficult to render in any translation. “Supply and support” in v.3 reads in Hebrew *mish'en* and *mish'edah*. The words are identical but *mish'en* is the masculine form and *mish'edah* the feminine of the same. Older translations render the words “stay” and “staff.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: “Stay is simply the masculine form of the Hebrew word for staff. Both words signify that upon which one leans. In this case the crops and the rainfall are referred to as the support or foundation of the nation’s material well-being. 2,3. Not only were drought and famine to beset the land of Judah, but also the leading classes of Jewish society would be removed from their posts in the government or the army; and even the skilled craftsmen, responsible for manufactured products, would be taken away. The country would be left without leadership or resources. This sentence was gradually carried out by the successive invasions of Nebuchadnezzar, particularly that of 597 BC, when ‘he carried away ... the mighty of the land ... and all the men of might, even seven thousand, and craftsmen and smiths a thousand, all that were strong and apt for war’ (2 Kings 24:15-16).”

We note that, although Isaiah seems to speak about the immediate future, his prophecy would not be fulfilled until approximately two hundred years later. *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “In the close of the second chapter (Isa 2:22), the prophet had cautioned his countrymen against confiding in man. In this chapter, a reason is given here why they should cease to do it-to wit, that God would soon take away their kings and princes.”

The taking away of support and supply depicts, first of all, the condition of a city under siege, where the reserves of food and water continue to diminish to the point where they become non-existent. But then also the male leadership will be eliminated, which is what happened when King Nebuchadnezzar appeared the first time in Jerusalem. In 3:12 youth and women take over the leadership, but they will also be taken out of the picture. Isaiah goes into quite some detail to describe to latter process.

The leadership of Jerusalem, as depicted in 3:2,3 is tainted by words as “soothsayer” and “clever enchanter.” Those two categories are indicative for the spiritual and moral condition of the leaders. The judges and prophets would be those the Lord had appointed, but the soothsayer and enchanter were the ones the population looked to for support and guidance. There was strong demonic influence in the ruling classes of the nation.

In our day vv.4-6 acquires an eerie familiar sound. We see pictures on the news of young gun-slitting children killing people in revolutions and gang wars. *The New International Version* states in a footnote in the place of “whose king was a servant,” “Or king is a child.” People without any training or experience will take over the reins of the country and dictate their wills and whims to the population. Government turns from stable leadership to erratic rampage. The world turns topsy-turvy in that “The young will rise up against the old, the base against the honorable.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “Children not only as regards age (the wicked and degenerate King Manasseh, who reigned from 698 to 642, was only twelve when he began to reign), but more especially as regards prudence and political ability. Such were Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. These kings by their foolish vacillation between Egypt and Babylon, brought their country to complete destruction within twenty years after the death of good King Josiah.” King Solomon must have foreseen such a situation when he wrote in Ecclesiastes: “Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time — for strength and not for drunkenness.”<sup>3</sup>

Vv.6 and 7 paint the saddest picture possible of a country that is brought to complete ruin both physically and spiritually. The place is “a heap of ruins” and there is nobody who is able to give any

1. Ps. 104:29
2. Cf. Gen. 1:27; 2:7.
3. Eccl. 10:16,17

direction. One of the family members is appointed leader because of the fact that he owns a cloak. But since that is all he has and since one cannot eat cloaks, he declines.

We must remember that these verses are spoken during the reign of King Uzziah, at a time when Judah had reached the greatest political stability and affluence since the days of Solomon. The words “Jerusalem staggers, Judah is falling” much have fallen on deaf ears. In the mind of the Old Testament Jews material prosperity was so much intertwined with God’s blessing that it was impossible for them to conceive that God had left them or that they had left God. Everything they saw proved the opposite.

The Hebrew text of “their words and deeds are against the LORD, defying his glorious presence” reads literally: “their tongues and their doings are against the LORD to provoke the eyes of his glory.” The people’s problem was not that they saw God’s glory and they stuck out their tongue at God, but that they were obvious of His presence. No one who stands before God and sees His glory can hold his own. Yet, v.9 speaks of this impossible defiance in spite of overwhelming evidence. “The look on their faces testifies against them.” Isaiah takes a picture of the people before their eyes are opened to God’s reality. That defiance will not last when the moment comes. The Apostle John describes what happens when people wake up to the reality of God’s glorious presence: “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.”<sup>1</sup>

The comparison between Jerusalem and Sodom does not necessarily suggest that homosexuality was rampant in Jerusalem, but that the people made no effort to hide their sinful behavior.

V.10 gives an unexpected twist to the foretelling of doom to the nation: “Tell the righteous it will be well with them...” Obviously, God speaks here to the prophet who has to say these words of comfort to those who have not given in to the general trend of immorality. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* quotes Bengel, who says: “Though nothing but croaking of frogs is heard on the surface of the pool, we are not to infer there are no fish beneath.” Most commentators refer here to the previous chapter where Isaiah said: “ ‘If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.’ For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”<sup>2</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* adds: “The mention of the fact that the men of Jerusalem have permanently injured their moral natures by sin, and thus ‘rewarded evil to themselves,’ leads the prophet to declare at this point, parenthetically, the general law, which extends alike to the evil and the good — that men receive in themselves the recompense of their deeds. The righteous raise their moral nature, become better, and, in becoming better, become happier. ‘It is well with them, for of the fruit of their doings they eat.’ The wicked deprave and corrupt themselves, lower their moral nature, become worse than they were, and, in becoming worse, become more miserable. ‘Woe unto them! with them it is ill; for the achievement of their hands is given them.’ ”

*Barnes’ Notes* observes that: “*The Septuagint* has rendered this in a remarkable manner, connecting it with the previous verse: ‘Woe unto their soul, for they take evil counsel among themselves, saying, ‘Let us bind the righteous, for he is troublesome unto us:’ therefore, they shall eat the fruit of their doings.’ ”

The reference to youth and women in v.12 pertains probably more to the quality of leadership of those in authority than to their age and sex. The Hebrew word ‘*owlel*, rendered here “children,” actually means “baby” or “infant.” We find the same word in the verse: “From the lips of *children* and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.”<sup>3</sup>

God’s compassion is expressed in the exclamation: “O my people, your guides lead you astray; they turn you from the path.” This is not a tone of harsh judgment. We find the same compassion in Jesus’ judgment over Jerusalem. We read: “As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said,

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1. Rev. 20:11
  2. Isa. 1:19,20
  3. Ps. 8:2

'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes.' ”<sup>1</sup> “The path” is here the way of repentance, confession of sin and righteousness.

Even in the judgment of vv.13-15 there is a tone of deep emotion. The elders and rulers of Jerusalem are accused of ruining the Lord’s vineyard. Here speaks the love of the gardener, as Jesus says in John’s Gospel: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.”<sup>2</sup> God tends His people as a gardener tends his vineyard expecting to enjoy the fruit of it. “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit.”<sup>3</sup> The fruit is ruined in that the leaders in Jerusalem have enriched themselves at the expense of the poor.

The use of the verbs “crush” and “grind” seems consistent with the picture of the vineyard. But the Hebrew word *daka*’ literally means “to bruise,” or “break in pieces”; it is never used in the sense of treading grapes in a winepress. The only other time Isaiah uses that verb is in the verse: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was *crushed* for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”<sup>4</sup> But God takes oppression of the poor very personally.<sup>5</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, gives the following introduction to the remainder of this whole section: “The section **3:16 – 4:1** is the expected sequel to the court scene of verses 13–15: the pronouncing of the sentence. Isaiah supplies it by introducing a separate oracle focusing on *the women* (lit. ‘daughters’) *of Zion*. In this way he (a) makes his accusation include all alike: the leading men in 3:2–4 are matched here by the prominent women. (b) He amplifies the charge: the outward offences of verses 14–15 are matched by an arrogant, self-indulgent spirit most plainly exhibited by Zion’s daughters; the way in which he moves from the ‘daughters’ (16–24) to Zion herself (25) indicates that the womenfolk encapsulate the spirit of the city. (c) He affirms the exactitude of divine judgment: in verses 16–17 the Lord describes pride and threatens judgment; his judgment takes the form of removal (18–23), replacement (24) and destitution (25 – 4:1). Five times the knell of *instead of* sounds (24) as the manifestations of haughtiness give way to dire equivalents. (d) He creates a bridge over to what he wishes to say next (4:4), for he has in mind that, where sin abounded, grace will much more abound.”

In v.16 Isaiah draws a brilliant painting of society women in an affluent society. The way they look and walk suggest an arrogance that expresses itself in spending lots of money on makeup. The outstretched neck suggests the cocking of their heads. Some Bible scholars interpret the expression “flirting eyes” as the application of eye shadow to the eyes. The “tripping along with mincing steps” was achieved by the use of ankle bracelets that would jingle as the ladies walked. These ornaments forced them to take little coquet steps. Isaiah’s description of the women of his day, some two-and-a-half millennia ago, sounds strangely modern and up-to-date to us. The prophet Amos, looking at the women in the Northern Kingdom at approximately the same time, women who probably used the same makeup as their Jerusalem counterparts, addresses them in a much less refined manner. We read: “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, ‘Bring us some drinks!’ ”<sup>6</sup> Isaiah’s ladies may have been overweight like Amos’ but he does not emphasize the fact. Isaiah was probably more “gentleman” than Amos.

The Hebrew of v.17 reads literally: “Therefore the Lord will smite with a scab the crown of the head of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will discover their secret parts.” Bible scholars generally interpret the first part of the sentence as being afflicted with a disease that causes baldness, but they are divided about the interpretation of the second part. Some believe that “discover their secret parts” means

1. Luke 19:41,42
2. John 15:1
3. John 15:8
4. Isa. 53:5
5. See Matt. 25:31-46.
6. Amos 4:1

being led away in captivity naked, others believe the words refer to the baldness that is the result of hair falling out. *Barnes' Notes* comments here: "There is some diversity of rendering to this expression. *The Septuagint* reads it: 'The Lord will humble the principal daughters of Zion'-those who belong to the court, or to the families of the princes. The Chaldee, 'The Lord will prostrate the glory of the daughters of Zion.' The Syriac is the same. The Hebrew word *sipach*, translated 'will smite with a scab,' means to 'make bald,' particularly to make the hair fall off by sickness. Our translation conveys the idea essentially, that is, that God would visit them with disease that would remove the hair which they regarded as so great an ornament, and on which they so much prided themselves. Few things would be so degrading and humiliating as being thus made bald. The description in this verse means, that God would humble and punish them; that they who so adorned themselves, and who were so proud of their ornaments, would be divested of their joyful attire, and be borne naked into captivity in a foreign land." Isaiah will refer again to the nakedness of the captives in later chapters.<sup>1</sup>

The newer Bible versions tend to apply "naked" to the scalp. *The New Living Translation*, for instance, reads: "The Lord will send a plague of scabs to ornament their heads. Yes, the LORD will make them bald for all to see!" But *The Living Bible* reads: "The Lord will send a plague of scabs to ornament their heads! He will expose their nakedness for all to see."

Vv.18-21 depict what the captors of the captives will do with the jewelry the ladies were wearing, yet this is portrayed as if the Lord is doing it. God allows these women to be robbed and humiliated because of their pride and arrogance. Vv.22-26 portray the result of this raid. The prophet zooms in from a crowd of people to one single person: lady Zion herself. She sits on the ground like a widow lamenting the death of her husband.

We must remember that the purpose of this vivid description of disaster and shame is to call people back to reality and repentance. God finds no pleasure in robbing people of their dignity and leaving them naked in the cold. Announcement of judgment is always an act of grace meant to call people to penitence.

As was mentioned earlier, chapter 4 verse 1 forms a bridge. V.1 introduces a man who appears to be a single survivor of the onslaught. We see him surrounded by seven women who implore him to marry all seven of them so that they will be able to regain some respectability. They are willing to pay whatever it takes. The following section explains in terms heavy with symbolic meaning who this Redeemer is who restores decency to people who have been shamed and degraded.

v. The greatness that is 'yet to be' (4:2-6)

***2 In that day the Branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel.***

***3 Those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called holy, all who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem.***

***4 The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire.***

***5 Then the LORD will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the glory will be a canopy.***

***6 It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.***

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says here: "In their humiliation the 'daughters' were willing to settle for a travesty of marriage (4:1) but the Lord designs for them a bridal canopy of unimaginable splendor (4:5). 'In [Christ] the sons of Adam boast/More blessings than their fathers lost.'<sup>2</sup> The poem is built on three parts of matching themes: it begins with the Lord's Branch (2) and ends with the Lord's booth (6), two distinct

1. See Isa. 20:4 and 47:3.

provisions made for Zion's people; next it designates the Lord's people as holy (3) and bridal (5); and at its center there is the double divine act of cleansing (4) and creation (5)."

Isaiah uses the symbol of "the Branch" to point to the Messiah. We read in a later chapter: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit."<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah and Zechariah use the same image in their prophecies.<sup>2</sup> But in this poem the word also serves as a reference to the Feast of Tabernacles, as is clear from the mention of the canopy in v.6. The Feast of Tabernacles was a celebration and commemoration of Israel's safe arrival in the Promised Land after the desert crossing. The construction of a booth and their dwelling in it for one week was also a reminder of the transience of life on earth. The Apostle John captures this beautifully in the prologue of his Gospel in the words "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." The Greek word rendered "made his dwelling" is *skenoō*, which literally means: "to tent" or "to encamp." *Young's Literal Translation* renders the verse: "And the Word became flesh, and did tabernacle among us." "The Word became flesh and pitched His tent among us" would be an acceptable rendering.

Somehow Isaiah manages to capture the full beauty and all its details in this poem that celebrated the fact that we enter into God's rest. It portrays the glory of the Messiah, the Pentecostal harvest that is the result of the coming of the Holy Spirit, the sanctification of the Bride of Christ, and the return of the Shekinah, the cloud by day and the glow by night.

It must be noted that The Feast of Tabernacles and the visible presence of the Shekinah form an unusual combination. The cloud and pillar of fire ceased to be visible after Israel crossed the River Jordan and The Feast of Tabernacles was never celebrated while Israel was still in the desert. Yet Isaiah combines the two here in an effort to draw the people of Judah to a higher level than they ever experienced before.

d. Grace exhausted (5:1-30)

i. A total work and a total loss (5:1-7)

***1 I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.***

***2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.***

***3 "Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.***

***4 What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?***

***5 Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled.***

***6 I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it."***

***7 The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.***

Isaiah uses the image of a vineyard at four different times in his book.<sup>3</sup> The vineyard is an image of Judah. Actually, Jacob was the first to apply the picture to Judah when, on his deathbed, he pronounced his blessings upon his sons.<sup>4</sup>

2. "Isaac Watts' hymn 'Jesus shall reign where're the sun...'"

1. Isa. 11:1

2. See Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8 and 6:12.

3. See Isa. 1:8; 3:14, 6 times in 5:1-10; and 27:2.

4. See Gen. 49:9-12.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The resemblance of the parable with which the chapter opens to one of those delivered by our Lord, and recorded in the three synoptic Gospels (... Matthew 21:33-41; ... Mark 12:1-9; ... Luke 20:9-16), has been frequently noticed.” The reference is to Jesus’ *Parable of the Tenants of a Vineyard*.

Isaiah’s poem is dedicated to “the one I love.” The Hebrew word *dowd* literally means, “to boil,” indicating a passionate love. It also has the meaning of “uncle” in which form it is frequently used. It is the keyword of *The Song of Songs*. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The prophet sings to Jehovah a song concerning his vineyard. The song consists of eight lines, beginning with ‘My Well-beloved,’ and ending with ‘wild grapes.’ It is in a lively, dancing measure, very unlike the general style of Isaiah’s poetry. The name ‘Well-beloved’ seems to be taken by the prophet from the Song of Songs, where it occurs above twenty times. It well expresses the feeling of a loving soul towards its Creator and Redeemer.”

The owner of the vineyard left nothing undone to assure that his vineyard would produce a good crop of grapes which would make wine of the highest quality. The fertile hillside assured the perfect well-drained soil. No rock or gravel was left to hinder the growth of the vines. The vines planted were from a good stock.

*The King James Version* reads: “And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof.” *The New International Version* reads: “He dug it up and cleared it of stones.” The Hebrew word *‘azaq* literally means: “to root up.” This is the only place in the Old Testament where this word is used. Since v.5 states that the Lord removed the hedge, the rendering “he fenced it” seems defensible. It is also clear that removal of stones requires some kind of digging. *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: “Vineyards were usually protected either by a hedge of thorns, commonly of the prickly pear, or else by a wall; but the rabbis say that in some cases, for additional security, they were surrounded by both. God had given his vineyard all the protection possible.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, remarks: “Isaiah’s Beloved had great expectations of his vineyard. He built a *watchtower*, not a temporary hut (1:8); *winepress* should be ‘wine-vat,’ for storage of the crop – and cut in the rock for permanency.”

It was natural for God to expect His vine to bear a crop of good grapes but the harvest consisted of “bad fruit.” The Hebrew word *be’ushiyim* actually means “poison-berries.” *The King James Version* renders it: “wild grapes.”

When God created man and placed the first human couple in Paradise, there was no reason for them to turn sour and fall into sin, yet they did. Instead of eating from the tree of life, they chose to eat from the tree of death. We know that the reason for this was the involvement of a third party, Satan who tempted the woman. In v.3 God places the question before Jerusalem. He wants the people to judge themselves. Since the “dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah” are the same as the vineyard, the question is one of self-evaluation. The question to be judged is, “Who is at fault, God or man?” As in Paradise there is a third party involved, but he is not mentioned here. The decisive factor is man’s choice. Throughout the ages Israel has always blamed God for her bad choices. As in the first chapter of Isaiah’s book, God says: “Come now, let us reason together.”<sup>1</sup>

The only explanation for a vine planted in perfect conditions to bear poison-berries instead of good grapes is its sinful nature. And this sinful nature is the result of man’s choice for Satan instead of for his Creator. Behind the question God put before Judah is the controversy between God and Satan, which will ultimately be settled by God being justified by His own creation. In the end, it will be the great multitude in heaven that will shout: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. Isa. 1:18

2. Rev. 19:1,2

The announcement of judgment in vv.5 and 6 pertains, first of all, to the Babylonian captivity. By taking away the hedge, God withdraws His hand of protection over Judah. This gave King Nebuchadnezzar the opportunity to capture Jerusalem and lead the people of Judah into captivity.

But the prophecy has a wider application. Judah was compared to a vine because God had chosen Jerusalem as the place of His revelation on earth. The real vine is Jesus Christ. Jesus compared Himself to the vine when He said: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener."<sup>1</sup> What God did to Judah was a shadow of what He would do to Himself in Jesus Christ when He hung on the cross.

V.7 details what God intended the Kingdom of Judah to be: "the garden of his delight." The Father would have to wait for the Incarnation before He could proclaim: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."<sup>2</sup> It is only in Christ that Judah would again become "the garden of his delight." That is the picture Jesus drew for His disciples when He said: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener."<sup>3</sup> Jesus concluded His description of His Father's garden with the words: "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."<sup>4</sup>

There is a play-on-words in the last clause of v.7 that is lost in the English translation. The words "justice," "bloodshed" sound alike in Hebrew, as do the words "righteousness" "cries of distress." "Justice" is *mishpat* in Hebrew and "bloodshed" is *mispach*. The Hebrew for "righteousness" is *tsedaqah* and "cries of distress" is *tsa'aqah*. The suggestion is that from a distance Judah sounded to be right. They seemed to be making the right kind of sounds, but coming closer, one could hear what the actual situation was. The façade was there, but it covered a complex of iniquity. Such was the moral condition of the people during Judah's golden age of prosperity under King Uzziah.

ii. The stink-fruit harvest and its consequences (5:8-30)

**8 Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land.**

**9 The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearing: "Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants.**

**10 A ten-acre vineyard will produce only a bath of wine, a homer of seed only an ephah of grain."**

**11 Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks, who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine.**

**12 They have harps and lyres at their banquets, tambourines and flutes and wine, but they have no regard for the deeds of the LORD, no respect for the work of his hands.**

**13 Therefore my people will go into exile for lack of understanding; their men of rank will die of hunger and their masses will be parched with thirst.**

**14 Therefore the grave enlarges its appetite and opens its mouth without limit; into it will descend their nobles and masses with all their brawlers and revelers.**

**15 So man will be brought low and mankind humbled, the eyes of the arrogant humbled.**

**16 But the LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness.**

**17 Then sheep will graze as in their own pasture; lambs will feed among the ruins of the rich.**

**18 Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit, and wickedness as with cart ropes,**

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1. John 15:1

2. Matt. 3:17

3. John 15:1

4. John 15:8

**19 to those who say, "Let God hurry, let him hasten his work so we may see it. Let it approach, let the plan of the Holy One of Israel come, so we may know it."**

**20 Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.**

**21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.**

**22 Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine and champions at mixing drinks,**

**23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe, but deny justice to the innocent.**

**24 Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw and as dry grass sinks down in the flames, so their roots will decay and their flowers blow away like dust; for they have rejected the law of the LORD Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.**

**25 Therefore the LORD's anger burns against his people; his hand is raised and he strikes them down. The mountains shake, and the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.**

**26 He lifts up a banner for the distant nations, he whistles for those at the ends of the earth. Here they come, swiftly and speedily!**

**27 Not one of them grows tired or stumbles, not one slumbers or sleeps; not a belt is loosened at the waist, not a sandal thong is broken.**

**28 Their arrows are sharp, all their bows are strung; their horses' hoofs seem like flint, their chariot wheels like a whirlwind.**

**29 Their roar is like that of the lion, they roar like young lions; they growl as they seize their prey and carry it off with no one to rescue.**

**30 In that day they will roar over it like the roaring of the sea. And if one looks at the land, he will see darkness and distress; even the light will be darkened by the clouds.**

This section can be divided along the lines of the six woes that are pronounced in it in vv. 8, 11, 18, 20, 21 and 22. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, explains: "The first two (8–12) deal with abuse of the material benefits of life, and the consequences are drawn out in two *therefore* sections (13, 14–17). The second series of four woes (18–23) deals with violation of the moral and spiritual obligations of life, and it too is followed by two *therefore* sections (24, 25–30). As we will see, the first *therefore* in each case (13, 24) is short and specifies how the coming judgment matches the foregoing sin; the second *therefore* is longer and forecasts total judgment, death (13) and destruction (25–30)."

One of the characteristics of Uzziah's reign of prosperity was the birth of the Monopoly game. Those who had the money to buy up adjacent property would do so in order to protect their privacy. In the free market of competition they killed off their competitors till they were the only ones left. This was not a game, it was a sinful reality. Instead of neighborly love, of "live and let live," it was a "dog-eat-dog" situation. In the Promised Land in which God had allotted property to each tribe and clan and family, according to their needs, such acquisitions were particularly sinful because they violated God's principles of living in the land. As *The Pulpit Commentary* observes, King Uzziah may have been one of the greatest sinners in respect of accumulation of land. We read in *Second Chronicles*: "Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the Corner Gate, at the Valley Gate and at the angle of the wall, and he fortified them. He also built towers in the desert and dug many cisterns, because he had much livestock in the foothills and in the plain. He had people working his fields and vineyards in the hills and in the fertile lands, for he loved the soil."<sup>1</sup>

V.9 sounds rather mild in the rendering of *The New International Version*: "The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearing." *Young's Literal Translation* of the Hebrew text reads: "By the weapons of Jehovah of Hosts ..." *The Living Bible* conveys some of the dramatic impact of these words in its paraphrase: "But the Lord Almighty has sworn your awful fate-with my own ears I heard him say..." And *The New Living Translation* reads: "But the LORD Almighty has sealed your awful fate. With my own ears

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1. II Chron. 26:9,10

I heard him say..." Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: "The affirmation affirms direct, verbal revelation. But beyond even this vital truth there is the manifestation of heaven's outrage in the explosive quality of the exclamation."

The unfamiliar measurements of the Old Testament make it difficult for us to appreciate the severity of God's wrath over the land. *The Good News Bible* renders v.10: "The grapevines growing on five acres of land will yield only five gallons of wine. Ten bushels of seed will produce only one bushel of grain." *The Living Bible* is even skimpier: "An acre of vineyard will not produce a gallon of juice! Ten bushels of seed will yield a one-bushel crop!" No details are given to explain the poverty of such a harvest. We understand, though, that without God's blessings there are no good crops.

The second "woe" spans vv.11-18 and deals with alcoholism. Modern science tells us that addiction to alcohol may be in a person's genes and ought to be seen as a sickness. God's condemnation of drunkenness seems to contradict this. When a person decides to drown his sorrow or frustration in strong drink instead of finding peace with God, he is responsible for his own choice. The addiction in v.11 was so strong that the first thing the alcoholic did when he woke up was to drink. And he did this till late at night. V.12 suggests that this sin was particularly prevalent among the upper-class people, among those who could afford it. The leaders of the nation had turned into party-animals.

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* compares this section with a similar one in Amos, which reads: "You put off the evil day and bring near a reign of terror. You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph." Clarke comments: "If the latter be the copier, he seems hardly to have equaled the elegance of the original."

The Hebrew words for "wine" and "strong drink" are *yayin* and *shekar*. The latter was highly intoxicating. It was most likely a kind of palm wine, comparable to modern whisky.

The way Isaiah puts it he emphasizes the contrast between those who are aware of God's revelation of Himself in Israel and those who lose themselves in drunken revelries. In Uzziah's days the temple in Jerusalem still stood and the presence of the Lord was still a reality. In the next chapter, Isaiah describes how he experienced that presence. Most of the leaders in Jerusalem, however, paid no attention to the Shekinah that was among them; they lost themselves in partying and drunkenness. King Uzziah must have shared the spirit of the age and its arrogance when he entered the temple to illegally burn incense on the altar and became infected with leprosy.<sup>1</sup>

The Babylonian captivity would put an end to the parties. Hunger and thirst would replace the abundance of exquisite dishes, wine and whiskey. The gaping jaws of Sheol would replace the open mouth of the revelers.

Vv.15 and 16 contrast the arrogance of man with the glory of God's manifestation of Himself. It is clear that these people were plagued by more than an addiction to alcohol; they believed themselves to be accountable to nobody but themselves. In ignoring the presence of God in their midst, they failed to prepare for the judgment to come. As the "woes" in this chapter continue it becomes clearer how this section leads up to Isaiah's personal experience of an encounter with God in the next chapter.

As the palaces are reduced to rubble the city will become a meadow, a grazing ground for sheep. J. Alex Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "Verse 17 may look like an idyllic pastoral scene; it is actually the empty achievement of human vanity; the net profit of pride. *Lambs* translates a needlessly altered Hebrew text which reads '(passing) strangers.' If we translated it 'tramps,' it would give the right feeling here."

Vv.18-23 introduce a second series of four "woes" that deal particularly with the moral failure of those who ignore the reality of God's revelation in their midst. *The Living Bible* paraphrases v.18: "Woe to those who drag their sins behind them like a bullock on a rope." We could interpret it as bringing in sin by the carload.

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1. See II Chron. 26:16-20.

V.19 sounds like a taunt to God to show Himself. The verse reminds us of the mockery at the crucifixion of Jesus, when the leaders of the people shouted: “He’s the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him.”<sup>1</sup> The Apostle Paul warns: “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”<sup>2</sup> Those who mock the Lord here mouth the title for God, “the Holy One of Israel,” which is Isaiah’s favorite title of God.

The “woe” in v.20 is the strongest indictment of all. Saying good is evil lays the foundation, putting darkness for light, points to the source, and confusing bitter with sweet indicates the experience. Man has dropped the gold standard of all moral behavior. The measure of good and evil is the character of God. To call good evil is calling God the devil; as the French writer Beaudelaire said: “If there is a God, he is the devil.” When the Pharisees in Jesus’ day said that He cast out demons by the power of Satan, Jesus told them that they committed the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> By denying the relationship between good and the character of God, man sets his own standards and lays the basis for situational ethics. All this is the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the eating of which has led to the death of humanity.

The condemnation of v.21 is the peak of self-deception. No fraud is greater than self-deception; no victory is greater than victory over self. Being wise in one’s own eyes means evaluation of self without reference to any outside measure of judgment. Or it may be the result of choosing one’s own rule of thumb. We can always find somebody who is less than we are and in comparison give ourselves high grades. The Apostle Paul issues the warning: “Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight.”<sup>4</sup> *The Book of Proverbs* says about this kind of people: “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.”<sup>5</sup> “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”<sup>6</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* adds: “Self-conceit is the antithesis of humility; and as humility is, in a certain sense, the crowning virtue, so self-conceit is a sort of finishing touch put to vice. While a man thinks humbly of himself, there is a chance that he may repent and amend. When he is ‘wise in his own eyes,’ he does not see why he should change.”

The last “woe” in this section is the most sarcastic one. The Hebrew reads literally: “Woe [unto them that are] mighty to drink wine, and men of strength who mingle strong drink.” Those “mighty men” are called *gibbor*, which denotes a champion. We find the same word in “The Nephilim were on the earth in those days — and also afterward — when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were *the heroes* of old, men of renown.”<sup>7</sup> And in: “David ran and stood over him. He took hold of the Philistine’s sword and drew it from the scabbard. After he killed him, he cut off his head with the sword. When the Philistines saw that their *hero* was dead, they turned and ran.”<sup>8</sup>

The heroism of these men expressed itself in the way they mixed a cocktail. Since alcohol provides a way of escape, the sarcasm in these words is for those heroes who run away. The following verse indicates that these men were the judges of the land. The application of the law was in the hand of drunken judges. And they were as corrupt as they were intoxicated.

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1. Matt. 27:42
  2. Gal. 6:7,8
  3. See Matt. 12:24-31.
  4. I Cor. 3:18,19
  5. Prov. 3:7
  6. Prov. 26:12
  7. Gen. 6:9
  8. I Sam. 17:51

The Lord's judgment against these people is swift and fierce. Since they rejected the law of the LORD Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel, the fire of judgment burns them up as fire consumes straw and dry grass. Centuries later John the Baptist will take up the same figure of speech: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah again mentions the earthquake that would shake the land during Uzziah's reign. We are not told how many people were killed by this quake. But the picture Isaiah draws, as bodies "lying like refuse in the streets," suggests a high number of victims. Some Bible scholars believe that an outbreak of the plague may have accounted for the bodies strewn in the streets.

*Barnes' Notes* observes: "The image is one that is very sublime. The earth, as if conscious of the presence of God, is represented as alarmed, and trembling. Whether it refers here to the earthquake, or to some other mode of punishment, cannot be determined. The fact, however, that such an earthquake had occurred in the time of Isaiah, would seem to fix the expression to that. Isaiah, from that, took occasion also to denounce future judgments. This was but the beginning of woes."

It is true that the earthquake was not the end of God's judgment. The natural disaster was followed by the Babylonian invasion that would cause more destruction than the quake had caused.

The last part of this chapter, vv.26-30, seems to describe the coming Babylonian invasion which would end in Judah's captivity. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "The cynical request that the Lord hurry up (19) finds its nemesis in the swift onset (28cd) of the invader."

It begins with the Lord lifting up a banner, which catches the attention of the far away nations and causes them to attack. The Hebrew word *nec* means a sign of any kind: "a flag," "a banner," or "a standard." Isaiah uses the same word in various contexts at least ten times in his book. In some cases it stands for a rallying point of salvation, as in the verses: "In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious,"<sup>2</sup> and: "He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth."<sup>3</sup> But here the raising up of the banner is the equivalent of the waving of a red flag. It gives a signal to the enemy that it is time to attack.

The Hebrew word, rendered "whistle" is *sharaq*, which *The King James Version* renders: "hiss." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments: "Bees were drawn out of their hives by the sound of a flute, or by hissing, or whistling. God, will collect the nations round Judea 'like bees' (Deut. 1:44; Ps. 118:12). Yet afterward Yahweh will 'hiss for' His people to 'gather them, for He hath redeemed them' (Zech 10:8)." The quoted verses read respectively: "The Amorites who lived in those hills came out against you; they chased you like a swarm of bees and beat you down from Seir all the way to Hormah," and: "I will signal for them and gather them in. Surely I will redeem them; they will be as numerous as before."

Vv.27-30 described the invading army. We must bear in mind that this prophecy was given approximately 200 years before the actual event. During King Uzziah's reign Judah became one of the strongest nations in the region. Jerusalem was built up to the point where it looked impregnable. We read: "Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the Corner Gate, at the Valley Gate and at the angle of the wall, and he fortified them."<sup>4</sup> A corps of 2,600 officers commanded an army of 307,500 well-trained troops, "a powerful force to support the king against his enemies."<sup>5</sup> The king had the newest weaponry at his disposal. We read: "In Jerusalem he made machines designed by skillful men for use on the towers and on the corner defenses to shoot arrows and hurl large stones."<sup>6</sup> We understand that Isaiah's call must have sounded like "A voice of

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1. Matt. 3:12
  2. Isa. 11:10
  3. Isa. 11:12
  4. II Chron. 26:9
  5. See II Chron. 26:13.

one calling in the desert” to the people of his time. His message must have sounded like the preaching of Noah who predicted a flood that would wipe out most of life on earth, while there was no cloud in the sky. There seemed to be no immediate need for repentance. Even if the people had taken Isaiah’s message seriously and had understood that the prediction pertained to a time still 200 years beyond the horizon, who would have cared for what would happen to a fourth of fifth generation hence? No one heard the roar of the lion or saw the brewing storm. Everything was nice and quiet and light around. It was Judah’s golden age; life was too good and easy to repent of anything.

## II. LIGHT BEYOND THE DARKNESS: THE COMING KING (6-12)

### a. The individual, atonement and commission (6:1-13)

*1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple.*

*2 Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.*

*3 And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."*

*4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.*

*5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."*

*6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar.*

*7 With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."*

*8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*

*9 He said, "Go and tell this people: "‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’"*

*10 Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."*

*11 Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?" And he answered: "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged,*

*12 until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.*

*13 And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."*

J. Alex Motyer, in Isaiah, introduces this whole section, chapters 6-12 with: “Isaiah has now established the backdrop against which he worked as a prophet. The people to whom he was sent were the heirs of great promises but appear to have forfeited them. By the end of his prefatory chapters, darkness has closed in upon them. Grace has been exhausted; nothing but judgment lies ahead. As we shall see, this is the position which Isaiah sketches in a very dramatic way in 6:1, but by the end of this section, darkness (6:1) has been replaced by singing (12:2, 5) and salvation (12:2–3), and the Lord in all his holiness (6:1–3) is dwelling in Zion in the midst of his people (12:6). Darkness and judgment, then, do not, after all, have the last word. Far from it, for the very promises that appeared to have been forfeited – the David-promises of 1:25–27 and the Zion promises of 4:2–6 – are the very things that come to pass (9:1–7; 11:1–9; 12:1–6). The exhausting of grace (5:4) has been superseded by the triumph of grace.”

The commentary continues: “We come nearer to the heart of this chapter by noting that it is pervaded by the thought of death: the dying king (1), the prophet under sentence of death (5), the sacrificial animal dead on the altar (6) and the felled tree (13). Twice over, death seems to spell the end but is found not to be so. The king lies dead (1) but it turns out to be only the felling of a tree, and life remains in the root (13); the prophet lies dead, struck down by sin under divine holiness (5) but when the seraph approaches, apparently bearing the fire of judgment, it is to apply the efficacy of a sacrifice for sin and to speak the word ‘atoned’ (7). Death does not have the last word.”

King Uzziah died approximately in 740 or 739 B.C. He had spent the last ten years of his life in seclusion because of the leprosy he had contracted while trying to illegally sacrifice incense in the temple.<sup>1</sup> His death marked the end of Judah’s golden age. Some Bible scholars believe that the prophecy coincided with Uzziah’s onset of leprosy. *Barnes’ Notes* states: “The rabbis say that the meaning is, that he then became ‘civilly’ dead, by ceasing to exercise his functions as a king, and that he was cut off as a leprous man from all connection with the people, and from all authority.”

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* explains: “Isaiah is outside, near the altar in front of the temple. The doors are supposed to open, and the veil hiding the Holy of holies to be withdrawn, unfolding to his view a vision of God, represented as an Eastern monarch, attended by seraphim as His ministers of state (1 Kings 22:19), and with a robe and flowing train (a badge of dignity in the East) which filled the temple. This assertion that he had seen God was, according to tradition, the pretext for sawing him asunder in Manasseh’s reign (Heb 11:37).” The verses quoted read: “Micaiah continued, ‘Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne with all the host of heaven standing around him on his right and on his left.’”<sup>2</sup> And: “They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated.”<sup>3</sup>

It has been debated whether the Hebrew word for “the Lord” in this text ought to be YHWH instead of Adoni. Referring to the words in v.9 and 10, John states in his Gospel that “Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.”<sup>4</sup>

The first question we ask is whether what Isaiah saw was a constant reality in the temple of which no one but he became aware, or whether God’s manifestation of Himself here was extraordinary? God had said to Moses that He would be present above the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.”<sup>5</sup> If God was always there in the form Isaiah saw Him here, how come nobody else had ever seen Him this way? It is true that God testified about Moses: “With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD,”<sup>6</sup> but we do not get the impression that Moses always saw the same thing Isaiah describes here. Isaiah appears to have seen more than “the form of the LORD” although he does not venture to describe God any further than “the train of His robe.” Maybe God gave Isaiah eyes to see what nobody else could ever see, but what was there all the time. A similar situation is described in relation to the prophet Elisha and his servant during an enemy attack on the city of Samaria. We read: “When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. ‘Oh, my lord, what shall we do?’ the servant asked. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ the prophet answered. ‘Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ And Elisha prayed, ‘O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.’ Then the LORD opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked

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1. See II Chron. 26:16-21.
  2. I Kings 22:19
  3. Heb. 11:37
  4. See John 12:41.
  5. Ex. 25:22
  6. Num. 12:8

and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”<sup>1</sup> This makes us wonder how many of us are realists!

We may suppose that Isaiah went to the temple as he was in the habit of doing, to bring a sacrifice and say a prayer. This vision makes most sense when we see the prophet as being at the place he describes, seeing the presence of the Lord as he saw it for the first time in his life. The prophet Ezekiel and the Apostle John received similar visions but at different places. Ezekiel was in captivity in Babylon<sup>2</sup> and what John saw<sup>3</sup> was not even on earth but in heaven. There is enough similarity in the three visions to conclude that they were identical in content.

From Isaiah’s description we get the impression that the dimensions of the vision went well beyond the building of the temple itself. If the temple were filled by the train of God’s robe, the face of God and the seraphs that flew around the throne must have been high up in the sky, well above the temple roof.

“Seraphs” is the English form of the Hebrew word *seraphim*, referring to fire. Isaiah’s vision is the only place in Scripture where they are mentioned by name, if a name it is. Isaiah does not give us their number and he was evidently unable to describe their faces because they covered their face with two of their wings. In John’s vision we also see four heavenly beings surrounding the throne of God, whose faces John describes as “like a lion,” “like an ox,” “like a man,” and “like a flying eagle.”<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel sees four faces on each of these beings. We read: “Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle.”<sup>5</sup> The discrepancy could be explained by the speed with which these heavenly beings were moving around. They seemed to have performed a fast and intricate dance pattern around the throne, almost like insects in the sunlight.

The fiery sight of the vision would have been enough to change Isaiah’s life forever. It seems to have been the combination of the sight and the music that shook him to the core of his being. As a human being, Isaiah was created in the image of God. Here he faces the original in whose image he was made and he realized how far he had deviated in his life from the pattern according to which he had been formed. It was like a comparison between an original and a caricature. But here we are running ahead of the text.

About the covering of the seraph’s feet, *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* quotes several sources to illustrate the meaning of this in eastern culture. One speaks of the king of Persia and states: “The king sat on the floor cross-legged, as is the custom of the country. He was covered with a yellow garment, which reached down to the feet when standing, but covered the feet for decency when sitting with his slippers off.” Another one quotes a French text of which the translation reads: “It is a great mark of respect in the East to cover the feet, and to bow down the head in the presence of the king.” The general consensus of Bible scholars is that covering one’s feet is an expression for covering the whole lower part of one’s body.

The thrice repeated “Holy,” in the chant of the seraphs may be a reference to the three Persons of the Trinity. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The Church on earth has taken pattern by the Church above; and the “Trisagion” is ever being repeated in one part of the earth or another without ceasing: ‘Thou continuest holy, O thou Worship of Israel.’ There is no attribute so essential to God as this. It is for his holiness, more than for anything else, that his creatures worship him. The triple repetition has been understood in all ages of the Church as connected with the doctrine of the Trinity. Holy is he who has created us, and bidden us worship him in the beauty of holiness! Holy is he who has redeemed us, and washed away our sins, and made us by profession holy! Holy is he who day by day sanctifies us, and makes us in very deed and truth, so far as we will permit him, holy!”

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1. II Kings 6:15-17
  2. Ezek. 1:4-28
  3. Rev. 4:1-11
  4. See Rev. 4:7,8.
  5. Ezek. 1:10

It is nigh to impossible to give a positive definition in human words of the concept of holiness. We are only able to speak about holiness in negative terms as being without sin, stain, or blemish. But saying what a thing is not, is not the same as saying what it is. We may characterize holiness as the sum of all divine attributes, infinitely multiplied, which is something beyond human comprehension. The seraphs' song helps us to understand that "holy" in heaven is expressed as "glory" on earth. But "glory" may be just as difficult to define as "holy." We know it when we see it but we cannot say what it is.

In John's heavenly vision of God on His throne, John describes the four living creatures as being "covered with eyes all around, even under his wings." If our two eyes give us three-dimensional perception, being covered with eyes must express a consciousness of reality that far surpasses our human ability. The seraphs, or living beings before the throne of God are far superior in intelligence and comprehension than any of us on earth. We may, therefore, conclude that what they chant is not a learned formula. They are not preprogrammed to sing; they sing what they know to be true. On earth it is "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory," in heaven: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."<sup>1</sup>

The words "the LORD Almighty" are the rendering of the Hebrew titles *Yahweh ts<sup>a</sup>baa'owt*, which means literally "the LORD of hosts," "the commander-in-chief." The sound of the seraph's singing made the temple shake and filled the place with smoke. We read that a similar phenomenon was observed during the consecration of the temple. "When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple."<sup>2</sup>

Where, at that time, the priests could not stay in the temple, Isaiah reports that he remains. Escape does not seem to have been an option for him. Being enveloped in glory, he cries out: "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." The Hebrew word *'owy* is a cry of despair, vaguely similar to "ouch" in English. "I am undone" is the rendering of one Hebrew word *damah*, variously rendered "cut down," "destroyed," or "cease to be." We find the word in the verse: "But man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that *perish*."<sup>3</sup> After having pronounced "woe" upon his fellowmen six times in the previous chapter, Isaiah here invokes it upon himself. The experience of seeing the Lord of glory and being enveloped in a cloud of glory made the prophet realize what it means to be lost.

Without the understanding of what it means to perish, we will never be able to appreciate fully what it means to be saved. Our lack of understanding of either is always related to a lack of seeing the glory of God. It is only in the presence of God that we wake up to reality, the reality of our being lost and the reality of salvation. Without that experience we cannot call ourselves Christians.

Isaiah's vision of God caused a very specific confession of sin. Isaiah's lips were not the only sinful members in his body, he knew himself to be lost totally in all the aspects of his humanity. But being a prophet and having spoken the Word of God before, he realized that the organ of prophecy, his lips, was not fit for the office. In condemning his lips, he condemned himself as a prophet *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, observes: "Appropriate to the context, which describes the antiphonal praises of the lips, sung in alternate responses ... by the seraphim; also appropriate to the office to which Isaiah is now specially being called-that of speaking as the prophet of God (Isa 6:9)."

God's response to Isaiah's confession is the purest illustration of the efficacy of atonement and the practical application of it to the place where it is needed. The fact that the live coal is applied to Isaiah's lips only does not mean that the rest of his being did not need salvation, but the application made Isaiah realize that when God touches us He heals us where we hurt.

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1. Rev. 4:8
  2. I Kings 8:10,11
  3. Ps. 49:12

It is impossible for us to instantly and fully understand all that is involved in our salvation. God's revelation to us is always in part and progressive. We will understand more as we advance. "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day."<sup>1</sup> Isaiah was, of course, familiar with the temple rituals and the various sacrifices that were offered daily. In coming to the temple to pray, he probably had brought his own sacrificial animal with him and handed it to the priest on duty to be sacrificed on the altar. He had laid his hand on the head of the animal, indicating that what happened to the animal happened to him by way of substitution. In principle, he died when the animal died and it was his body that was burned as a sacrifice. He probably had done this several times before, almost routinely, without realizing the profound implications of the ritual. It was in the presence of God that the reality fully penetrated to him and he understood what it means to have the blood of the sacrifice applied to one's life. The same realization of his sinfulness made him wake up to the reality of his forgiveness. The Holy Spirit only convicts us of sin to make salvation real to us. This reality ought to be even greater to us who know that we have been forgiven, not because some animal died in our place, but because God's Son Himself took our place and atoned for our sins.

An amazing feature in this story is the fact that the seraph could not handle the coal from the altar with his bare hands; he used a pair of tongs to carry it to Isaiah. But the live coal was applied to Isaiah's bare lips. In more than one sense angels cannot touch salvation. As Peter says: "Even angels long to look into these things."<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah says: "He touched my mouth"; the seraph says: "this has touched your lips." The slight difference in wording seems to indicate that what the seraph did was symbolic, but Isaiah experienced it as having a profound effect upon him that went well beyond a mere touch on the lips. The lips are part of the mouth, and the mouth is the organ of speech. Isaiah understood that God touched him so that he could henceforth speak God's Word. A similar experience is recorded in the call of Moses. Moses' reaction to the call was negative. We read: "Moses said to the LORD, 'O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.' The LORD said to him, 'Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.'"<sup>3</sup>

Isaiah's experience with atonement conditioned him to hear the voice of the Lord. We get the impression that the God had been speaking all the time but Isaiah was unable to hear the voice. The removal of his sin and the cleansing of his mouth allowed him to be tuned in, so to speak, to the frequency on which God's voice could be heard.

Bible scholars have been struck by the fact that God uses both the singular and the plural in "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" *Barnes' Notes* comments: "The change of number here, from the singular to the plural, is very remarkable. Jerome, on this place, says that it indicates the 'sacrament' of the Trinity. *The Septuagint* renders it, 'whom shall I send, and who will go to this people?' The Chaldee, 'whom shall I send to prophesy, and who will go to teach?' The Syriac, 'whom shall I send, and who will go?' The Arabic has followed *The Septuagint*. The use of the plural pronouns 'we and us,' as applicable to God, occurs several times in the Old Testament. Thus, Gen 1:26: 'And God said, Let us make man in our image;' Gen 11:6-7: 'And Jehovah said, Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language.' Such a use of the name of God in the plural is very common, but it is not clear that there is a reference to the doctrine of the Trinity. In some cases, it is evident that it cannot have such a reference, and that no 'argument' can be drawn from the use of that plural form in favor of such a doctrine."

Isaiah's response is swift. Although God's call was not addressed to him personally, he immediately understood that his experience of being forgiven qualified him to answer this call for volunteers. God does not always call for volunteers. In most cases in which a prophet was called refusal was

1. Prov. 4:18
2. I Pet. 1:12
3. Ex. 4:10-12

not an option. The Apostle Paul testifies: “Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”<sup>1</sup> But it seems that Isaiah would not have incurred any guilt if he had not responded.

J. Alex Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “The immediate effect of atonement is reconciliation. Isaiah first saw the Lord afar off (1), but now he is near enough to overhear the divine musing; he had once been ‘silenced’ by sin (5) but as the redeemed sinner he is free to speak. The God who shut him out (4) has brought him home. But he finds that being joined to God means joining a missionary society: he has been brought in in order to be sent out.”

The message with which God charges Isaiah is puzzling and negative in tone. Superficial reading of the commission would make us conclude that God wants His people to be lost. How else do we interpret the words: “Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes?” It sounds as if God creates this callous condition of the heart. But that would, of course, contradict the biblical message that God wants all men to be saved.<sup>2</sup> A footnote in *The New International Version* gives the reading of *The Septuagint*: “You will be ever hearing, but never understanding; you will be ever seeing, but never perceiving. This people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.”

The people’s callousness is not what God wants, but it is the condition He sees. The best way to interpret these words seems to be to assign a tone of irony to them. Since the people have refused to repent and change their ways, God says to them: “Go ahead, continue in the condition in which you are at present.” A similar tone we find in Revelation where the angel says to the Apostle John: “Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy.”<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew of v.9 is emphatic: “In hearing hear ... in seeing see...” The implication is that the people have the opportunity and the ability to hear and to see, but they refuse to avail themselves of it. They possess ears and eyes that are in working condition, but they choose to ignore the message. Matthew quotes these verses with a slight but significant change in wording in the context of Jesus’ use of parables. When the disciples asked Jesus why He spoke in parables, we read: “In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’”<sup>4</sup> Both in the original text and in the quotation it is made clear that God would heal if the people would turn to Him. It is not God’s unwillingness to save, but man’s unwillingness to be saved that makes people go to hell.

In His epistles to the seven churches, Jesus says to each of them: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”<sup>5</sup> This is also the concluding message of the whole book of Revelation.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of Isaiah’s recent experience of confession and cleansing, these words take on a deeper meaning. Isaiah heard the voice of God when he realized he was a sinner whose sins had been atoned for. This conditioned him to hear and to see. Adversely, it was the people’s unwillingness to confess and receive pardon that kept them from using their ears and eyes for the purpose for which they were given. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin but He only calls those who are clean. Jesus began to use parables after the

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1. I Cor, 9:16
  2. I Tim. 2:4; II Peter 3:9
  3. Rev. 22:11
  4. Matt. 13:14,15
  5. See Rev. 2 and 3.
  6. Rev. 13:9

leaders of Judah spread the word among the people: “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.”<sup>1</sup> In saying this they sinned against the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, replies to the question of the strangeness of the command given to Isaiah: “The most helpful approach is to ask how, in the light of his subsequent ministry, Isaiah understood what he was commanded. The answer lies in 28:9–10, where we learn that Isaiah presented the truth with such simplicity that the ‘men of the world’ of his day would pack him off to teach kindergarten! And the whole Isaianic literature bears the same mark of a plain, systemic, reasoned approach. In other words, verses 9–10 are a very stark statement of the preacher’s dilemma: those who resist the truth can be changed only by telling them the truth, but to do this exposes them to the danger of rejecting the truth yet once again – and maybe this further rejection will push them beyond the point of no return and they will become irretrievably hardened in mind and heart (Heb. 6:4–8). The human eye cannot see beyond ‘the point of no return’ in advance – nor necessarily recognize it when it is past, but the all-sovereign God both knows it and indeed appoints it as he presides, with perfect righteousness and justice, over the human psychological process which he created. It was at just such a time that Isaiah was called to the prophetic-preaching office and understood what his terms of commission meant: he was to bring God’s word with fresh, even unparalleled clarity – for only the truth could win and change them; but in their negative response his hearers would pass the point of no return. The opportunity which could spell their salvation would spell their judgment.”

The second part of v.10 states clearly that turning to the Lord will result in healing. God presents this fact as if He would have no choice in the matter. Jesus made similar statements to the people of His day: “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away.” And “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”<sup>3</sup>

The message God gave Isaiah to proclaim hit him hard. His question “For how long, O Lord?” is a cry of despair. Being a prophet, being someone who passes on the Word of God to others, is never something that can be done without personal involvement. God wants us to experience what we preach. He wants us to be deeply affected by what we say to others in His behalf. We may be a psychologist and counsel people without getting deeply, emotionally and personally involved, but we cannot be God’s messengers without feeling the message in our bones. Amos shows us that we cannot be a preacher without being an intercessor at the same time. We read: “This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king’s share had been harvested and just as the second crop was coming up. When they had stripped the land clean, I cried out, ‘Sovereign LORD, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!’ So the LORD relented. ‘This will not happen,’ the LORD said. This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: The Sovereign LORD was calling for judgment by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land. Then I cried out, ‘Sovereign LORD, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!’ So the LORD relented. ‘This will not happen either,’ the Sovereign LORD said.”<sup>4</sup>

But in Isaiah’s case God did not relent. The difference between Amos and Isaiah’s predicament was that in Amos’ case it was a matter of what God intended to do with the land in order to wake up the people; in Isaiah’s case it was what the people had to do to themselves, turn to the Lord and confess. God cannot and does not do that for us. We are sovereign in our own life until we hand the keys to God.

God tells Isaiah that Judah’s tree will be cut down; the land will be laid waste. The Babylonian captivity would deplete the land.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “The envisaged program is one of mounting tragedy: destruction of *cities ... houses ... fields* (11), deportation (12) and yet further loss (13a). Assyria is the power threatening the nation at present, but Isaiah will soon learn that Assyria is not to be the agent of complete

1. Matt. 12:24
2. See Matt. 12:32.
3. John 6:37, 39,40
4. Amos 7:1-6

loss. Nevertheless, his prediction was 'at home' in its own times. Assyria introduced a policy of deportation (2 Ki. 17) and Babylon continued it (2 Ki. 24–25). In this way the verses are a prospectus for Isaiah's book: how the Assyrian threat will come and go (chs. 7 – 37) and how, beyond that, a darker threat, Babylon, will arise from a profounder cause (chs. 38 – 48)."

Yet, the last word is not one of total annihilation. The tree will be cut down, but it will come back to life. God never hands it all to the enemy. God's victory over Satan and evil is always one of death and resurrection. John the Baptist spoke about God's judgment in terms of the felling of a tree. "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."<sup>1</sup> But in Isaiah the hope is kept alive. Isaiah would prophesy later: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit."<sup>2</sup> This also reveals that the ultimate solution for the problem of sin, Judah's sin and ours, is in the felling of God's own tree, in the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ. God would take the punishment for all sin upon Himself.

Isaiah may not have understood what God meant with these last words. All he could see was the stump of a tree; what God saw was the "holy seed," that which would come back to life, grow and bear fruit.

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments on the last verse of the chapter: "[A tenth] This passage, though somewhat obscure, and variously explained by various interpreters, has, I think, been made so clear by the accomplishment of the prophecy, that there remains little room to doubt of the sense of it. When Nebuchadnezzar had carried away the greater and better part of the people into captivity, there was yet a tenth remaining in the land, the poorer sort left to be vine-dressers and husbandmen, under Gedaliah, 2 Kings 25:12,22, and the dispersed Jews gathered themselves together, and returned to him, Jer 40:12; yet even these, fleeing into Egypt after the death of Gedaliah, contrary to the warning of God given by the prophet Jeremiah, miserably perished there. Again, in the subsequent and more remarkable completion of the prophecy in the destruction of Jerusalem, and the dissolution of the commonwealth by the Romans, when the Jews, after the loss of above a million of men, had increased from the scanty residue that was left of them, and had become very numerous again in their country; Hadrian, provoked by their rebellious behavior, slew above half a million more of them, and a second time almost extirpated the nation. Yet after these signal and almost universal destructions of that nation, and after so many other repeated exterminations and massacres of them in different times and on various occasions since, we yet see, with astonishment, that the stock still remains, from which God, according to his promise frequently given by his prophets, will cause his people to shoot forth again, and to flourish." Adam Clarke knew nothing of Hitler's Holocaust and of the restoration of the state of Israel in 1948.

The "holy seed" stands for more than for the rebirth of the nation. The "holy seed" is, primarily, our Lord Jesus Christ, the single individual who brought about reconciliation through atonement. It is the fruit borne by the branch of Jesse that will eventually save Israel and the whole world.

b. Darkness and light in Judah (7:1 – 9:7)

i. The moment of decision (7:1-17)

***1 When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.***

***2 Now the house of David was told, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim"; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.***

***3 Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field.***

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1. Matt. 3:10

2. Isa. 11:1

**4** Say to him, *'Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood — because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah.*

**5** Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying,

**6** *"Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it."*

**7** Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: *'It will not take place, it will not happen,*

**8** *for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin. Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.*

**9** *The head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son. If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."*

**10** Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz,

**11** *"Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights."*

**12** But Ahaz said, *"I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test."*

**13** Then Isaiah said, *"Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also?"*

**14** *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.*

**15** *He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right.*

**16** *But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.*

**17** *The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah — he will bring the king of Assyria."*

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: "The matching fourfold addresses to Judah and Israel which begin here ... work out the position Isaiah has now reached. Chapter 5 brought into question the possibility of future hope, but Isaiah found that question answered both for himself (6:48) and his people (6:13b). Thus a parallel was established: Isaiah is the model for the future. The word of God is about to come to king and people (7:1–17) and rejection of it will bring disaster (7:18 – 8:8), but within a disbelieving people there will be those who have personally embraced the way of faith and based their lives on the Lord's word (8:9–22), and for them there is light beyond the present darkness (8:23 – 9:7). Thus the doctrine of the believing remnant flowers and, alongside it, the dying Uzziah (6:1) is a foil for the hope which the subsection ends: the birth of the child with four names (9:6), the 'holy seed' (6:13) sprouting from the stump of the felled tree."

*Barnes' Notes* states about Ahaz: "Ahaz began to reign about 738 years before Christ. By a comparison of 2 Kings 16:5 ... with 2 Chron 28:5, etc., it will be seen that Judea was twice invaded by Rezin and Pekah in the reign of Ahaz." Since King Uzziah died approximately in 762 BC there must be a gap of about 25 years between this chapter and the previous one.

*The Pulpit Commentary* explains: "The Syro-Israelitish war is touched on both in Kings and Chronicles. In Kings the alliance between Rezin and Pekah is distinctly declared, as also the fact that they conjointly besieged Jerusalem (...2 Kings 16:5). From Chronicles we learn that, before the siege, Ahaz was twice defeated with great loss, once by the Syrians (... 2 Chronicles 28:5), and once by the Israelites (...2 Chronicles 28:6). He was probably, therefore, reduced to great straits at the time when Isaiah received directions to seek an interview with him, and communicate to him a comforting message from Jehovah."

The biblical record on Ahaz reports negatively on his reign. We read: "Ahaz was twenty years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem sixteen years. Unlike David his father, he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD his God. He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every

spreading tree.”<sup>1</sup> The attacks on Judah by Israel and Syria were, obviously, God’s answer to the king’s idolatry.

The unsuccessful attacks on Judah began early in Azah’s reign, since *the Book of Second Kings* mentions them at the time of Jotham’s death and Azah’s ascension to the throne.<sup>2</sup> We are not told why the rumor Isaiah reports here caused such disturbance in Jerusalem. The king and the people could have supposed that, since God had protected them thus far, He would do it again. Isaiah’s wording seems to provide an ironic comment on the panic the rumor causes. One commentator observes: “The mention of ‘David’ alludes, in sad contrast with the present, to the time when David made Syria subject to him (2 Sam 8:6).” The text also emphasizes the stark dissimilarity between David’s trust in God in times of pressure and the complete lack of faith demonstrated by David’s descendant. Isaiah’s comparison of the people with a hurricane that hits the forest also brings out the divine ironic way of looking at people who demonstrate a lack of faith in God.

*The Fausset’s Bible Dictionary* also comments on Isaiah’s encounter with the king: “It is an undesigned propriety in Isa 7, and therefore a mark of truth, that the place of meeting was the pool; for there it was we know, from the independent history in Chronicles, that Hezekiah his son, subsequently in Sennacherib’s invasion, with much people stopped the waters without the city to cut off the enemy’s supply (2 Chron 32:3-5). The place was appropriate to Isaiah’s message from God that their labors were unnecessary, for God would save the city; it was also suitable for addressing the king and the multitude gathered for the stopping of the waters there.”

This chapter shows the tension between the threats God allowed Judah’s enemies to make and the protection He provided for them. The obvious intent in creating this tension was that the king and the people would become sufficiently shaken up to turn to God and receive the healing God promised in the previous chapter. God turned up the heat under Judah to a degree that would make them uncomfortable without getting seriously burned. As human beings we have reason to fear. We live in a hostile world that has become more and more unfit for human habitation. But we must distinguish between fear and fear. If we fear the right thing we will live; if we fear the wrong thing we will die. Jesus drew the line clearly when He told His disciples: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”<sup>3</sup>

God commands Isaiah to meet King Ahaz at the aqueduct outside Jerusalem, where the king was probably investigating what would happen to the water supply of the city when the enemy would come and besiege Jerusalem. The city was indeed vulnerable because of the above-the-ground water canal. It was not until the days of King Hezekiah that an underground tunnel would be constructed to make the city safer.<sup>4</sup> The place of Isaiah’s meeting with the king provided the important background for the message the prophet had to convey. The presence of Isaiah’s son also added meaning to the audience. J. Alex Motyer, in *Isaiah*, remarks about this: “*Shear-Jashub* means ‘a remnant will return.’ It is an ambivalent name. The noun comes first for emphasis, but does it mean ‘(only) a remnant ...’ or ‘(a guaranteed) remnant ...?’ Is it a threat of decimation or a promise of survival? Isaiah was so sure on both counts – that unbelief would destroy and faith would save (see 9) – that he made the word of God ‘become flesh’ in the person of his son. Ahaz, a man of his time, should have felt the force of this, but he was otherwise engaged at *the aqueduct of the Upper Pool*, trying to secure his water-supply against the coming siege.”

God told Isaiah to use five different words of encouragement in presenting His message to the king. *The New International Version* only uses four words: “Be careful,” “keep calm,” “don’t be afraid,” and “do

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1. II Kings 16:1-4
  2. See II Kings 15:27.
  3. Matt. 10:28
  4. See II Kings 20:20.

not lose heart,” but the Hebrew text appears to use five. “Be careful” is the translation of the Hebrew word *shamar*, which means “to put a hedge about,” or “to protect.” Ahaz’ lack of faith had left him without protection against attacks by an enemy who was much more dangerous than Syria and Israel combined.

“Keep calm” is the rendering of the Hebrew word *shaqat*, meaning “relax.” The Hebrew for “fear not” is *‘al-yare’*. The expression is typically found in situations when the Lord or one of His angels speaks to a human being. For instance, we read: “God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘What is the matter, Hagar? *Do not be afraid*; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there.’”<sup>1</sup> And “But the LORD said to [Gideon], “Peace! *Do not be afraid*. You are not going to die.”<sup>2</sup> “Lose heart” is undoubtedly a good rendering of the Hebrew word *lebab rakak*, which refers to the unstable condition of the heart. *The Interlinear Bible* translates both words with “faint-hearted,” reading “neither be fainthearted-fainthearted,” as if the heart beats irregularly or skips a beat. That reading makes the sentence very vivid and expressive. Isaiah calls the two attacking kings “two smoldering stubs of firewood.” *The New Living Translation* uses the expression “those two burned-out embers.”

Bible scholars have extensively discussed the textual problem of vv.8 and 9 in regards to the chronology of the prophecy. Some believe that a copyist may have mixed up some lines, which disturbs the symmetry of the parallelism. It would be outside the useful boundaries of this study to go into the details of this controversy. The gist of the prophecy seems to be that the plan of the two kings, Rezin and Pekah, to replace King Ahaz with their own puppet, Tabeel, will not succeed. *The Living Bible* probably catches the general idea well with its paraphrase: “This plan will not succeed, for Damascus will remain the capital of Syria alone, and King Rezin’s kingdom will not increase its boundaries. And within sixty-five years Ephraim, too, will be crushed and broken. Samaria is the capital of Ephraim alone, and King Pekah’s power will not increase.” We will leave the question, whether it would in fact be sixty-five years until the Assyrian captivity of the Northern Kingdom, to the experts.

The statements that Damascus is the capital of Syria and Rezin its king, that Samaria is the capital of Israel and Pekah, son of Remaliah its king may be seen as affirmation of the fact that only Judah was a theocracy and that Ahaz was reigning by the grace of God. That would give more depth to the admonition: “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on this: “Full faith in the promise of ver. 7 would have enabled Ahaz to dispense with all plans of earthly policy, and to ‘stand fast in the Lord,’ without calling in the aid of any ‘arm of flesh.’ Distrust of the promise would lead him to take steps which would not tend to ‘establish’ him, but would make his position more insecure.”

J. Alex Motyer, in *Isaiah*, makes these important comments on vv.8 and 9: “The verses are a six-line poem. In lines 1 and 2 (8ab), 4 and 5 (9ab) the northern kingdoms are analyzed: the country (*Aram ... Ephraim*) is traced to its capital (*Damascus – Samaria*) and up to its king (*Rezin ... Remaliah’s son*). In line 3 (8cd) and 6 (9cd) conclusions are drawn: Ephraim is doomed (*shattered*); if Ahaz refuses to trust he has no future. As in much poetry, meaning is expressed allusively rather than directly. First there is common sense. You are in a flap because seemingly powerful nations threaten. Trace them back to the source and what do they amount to? Only Rezin and Remaliah’s son! Secondly, there is implication. If Ephraim and Aram can be traced back to source, what of Judah? Its capital and its king the Davidic King: the city the Lord chose to dwell in (1 Ki. 11:13), and the Lord’s king on the Lord’s throne (1 Ch. 29:23), back by the all commanding power of verse 7. Thirdly, there is warning. Ephraim chose the security of military alliance but time would demonstrate its folly. The reference is to 671 BC when Esarhaddon of Assyria, by importing foreign settlers (2 Ki. 17:24; 2 Ch. 33:11; Ezr. 4:2), put an end to all hope of reviving the old northern kingdom. Suppose, then, Judah goes the way of alliance? This leads to a stark choice: *Stand firm in your faith ... not stand at all* (9)! NIV reflects the telling rhyme by which Isaiah links these two lines (*ta<sup>a</sup>minû ... têtâmênû*). Crudely, ‘Trust or bust’ – a paraphrastic rendering as shocking as the original is blunt. Ahaz stands at the point of no return.”

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1. Gen. 21:17

2. Judges 6:23

Considering the kind of person King Ahaz was, an idolater who had sacrificed his own son to a demon, it is difficult to understand the patience and compassion with which God treats him. Trust in the truth of God's Word can hardly have been the ruling passion of this man's life. God invites him to ask for a miracle that would give undeniable proof of His truth. Ahaz's refusal is couched in the most pious terms. The king quotes Moses' words in Deuteronomy: "Do not test the LORD your God as you did at Massah."<sup>1</sup> These were the very words Jesus would answer to Satan.<sup>2</sup> J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: "The sin of putting the Lord to the test is refusing to trust him and his past faithfulnesses unless he prove himself trustworthy all over again. The situation is transformed when the Lord proffers a sign. On his side nothing is more important than that his promises are met by trust. Therefore he is ready to go to *deepest depths* ... *highest heights* to help, even to make Ahaz take up a position of faith as the solution to the crisis. Pious though his words sound, Ahaz is doing the devil's work of quoting Scripture for his own purposes and thereby displaying himself as the dogmatic unbeliever. This was his moment of decision, his point of no return." What is difficult to understand for us is that God does not crush this obstacle of unbelief, but allows him to cast the decisive vote in the future of Judah. We would wish God would not always honor us the way He does.

When God has treated King Ahaz with the utmost patience, Isaiah loses his with the king. Ahaz's pious refusal to ask for a sign of confirmation brings the prophet to the end of his wits. He addresses not the king individually, but the king as representative of the house of David. The survival of the dynasty of the theocracy is at stake. And the premise upon which the house of David existed was that it would be the bloodline of the Messiah. Ahaz's refusal to put his faith in God threatens to break the link of the chain that leads to the salvation of the world. Not knowing God, King Ahaz did not know who he was himself either. He had no idea where his place was in God's plan with this world. But human ignorance and stupidity does not annul God's eternal wisdom. Where humanity fails, God takes over.

The sign Isaiah announces at this point has become a point of endless discussion and speculation among theologians and non-theologians. The meaning of the Hebrew word '*almah*' in v.7 has been analyzed and interpreted as either "virgin" or "young woman." The root meaning of the word appears to be "something kept out of sight." Since '*almah*' is the feminine form of the word, there ought to be little doubt about the meaning. Studies of whether Isaiah would have used *bethuwlah* instead of '*almah*' if he wanted to emphasize virginity have not been conclusive and find no place in this study.

*Barnes' Notes* observes about the text: "Perhaps there is no prophecy in the Old Testament on which more has been written, and which has produced more perplexity among commentators than this. And after all, it still remains, in many respects, very obscure. Its general original meaning is not difficult. It is, that in a short time-within the time when a young woman, then a virgin, should conceive and bring forth a child, and that child should grow old enough to distinguish between good and evils-the calamity which Ahaz feared would be entirely removed. The confederacy would be broken up, and the land forsaken by both those kings. The conception and birth of a child-which could be known only by him who knows 'all' future events-would be the evidence of such a result. His appropriate 'name' would be such as would be a 'sign,' or an indication that God was the protector of the nation, or was still with them."

In order to look at the meaning of this prophecy in the context in which Isaiah gave it, we must temporarily detach it from the quotation in Matthew's Gospel,<sup>3</sup> where it is applied to the virgin birth of Christ. If the prophecy was to have any meaning for King Ahaz and the people of his time, and if it were to serve as proof of God's promise of redemption, it must have had a primary fulfillment in the period it was spoken. The words: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel!" do not require that the topic be a supernatural pregnancy. We are not given the identity of the woman, who would become pregnant, but it must have been a girl known to the king, maybe his daughter who was a

1. Deut. 6:16
2. See Matt. 4:7.
3. See Matt. 1:23.

virgin at the time Isaiah spoke. The most miraculous aspect of the prophecy is the prediction of the sex of the baby and the name the mother will give him (supposing that she had not heard the prophecy).

The Hebrew word found in Matthew's quotation is *parthenos*, which also literally means "a maiden," by implication, "an unmarried daughter." Etymologically it cannot be proven that any of the words used in Hebrew or Greek demand physical virginity. It is the context in which it is found that provides that suggestion. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "It is questioned whether the word translated 'virgin,' viz. 'almah,' has necessarily that meaning; but it is admitted that the meaning is borne out by every other place in which the word occurs in the Old Testament (...Genesis 24:43; ...Exodus 2:8; ...Psalm 68:25; ...Proverbs 30:19; Cant. 1:3; 6:8). The LXX, writing two centuries before the birth of Christ, translate by *parthenos* ... The Hebrew, however, has not 'a virgin,' but 'the virgin' (and so *The Septuagint*, *hè parthenov*), which points to some special virgin, preeminent above all others."

In the case of Isaiah and King Ahaz, we may certainly assume that the lady in question was unmarried and a virgin at the time Isaiah spoke. There is no suggestion in this case that her pregnancy was achieved in any other way but natural. Isaiah's prophecy was supernatural in that it predicted things that did not yet exist and that would come to pass. A parallel prophecy is found at the occasion of Saul being anointed king. Samuel says to him: "When you leave me today, you will meet two men near Rachel's tomb, at Zelzah on the border of Benjamin. They will say to you, 'The donkeys you set out to look for have been found. And now your father has stopped thinking about them and is worried about you. He is asking, 'What shall I do about my son?' Then you will go on from there until you reach the great tree of Tabor. Three men going up to God at Bethel will meet you there. One will be carrying three young goats, another three loaves of bread, and another a skin of wine. They will greet you and offer you two loaves of bread, which you will accept from them."<sup>1</sup> The predicted facts in Samuel's prophecy were not supernatural; anyone would have considered them coincidences. The supernatural part was the prediction and the timing.

Matthew's quotations of Old Testament prophecies in his Gospel narrative are worth a study apart. Most of them acquire a new meaning because of the context in which they are quoted, a meaning, we may assume, the Holy Spirit had in mind when He inspired the older prophets. Matthew's quotation of Isaiah's text interprets it in a way that sheds a lot of light on Isaiah's message and time as well. It indicates that God had much more in mind than protecting Jerusalem from enemy attacks. In His dealings with Israel, God always had the salvation of the world in mind. In the context of Isaiah, "the virgin" may have been Ahaz's own daughter, the princess; in God's mind, "the virgin" is the young woman He chose to be the instrument of the Incarnation of the eternal Word of God.

Ahaz's worry about the threatening invasion will have blotted out of his mind any thought pertaining to God's promises to Israel as the people from among whom the Messiah would be born. All true Israelites must have been familiar with the reason for which God had chosen them. From God's prophecy to Eve concerning her "offspring" that would crush the head of the serpent,<sup>2</sup> and God's promise to Abraham that all peoples on earth would be blessed through him,<sup>3</sup> to Jacob's prophecy for Judah that "the scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his"<sup>4</sup> must have kept the hope alive for the faithful ones. Even if King Ahaz had seriously occupied himself with the topic of Israel's hope, the stress of the threatening invasion by Israel and Syria would have banned any thought from his mind that Isaiah's prophecy could have anything to do with Israel's reason for existence. Only intimate fellowship with God keeps the hope alive and that the king did not enjoy. Even the meaning of the name given to the child, Immanuel, failed to wake Ahaz up to reality. The thought that God could, in any way, in a practical manner, be involved in Judah's circumstances, that

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1. I Sam. 10:2-4
  2. Gen. 3:15
  3. Gen. 12:3
  4. Gen. 49:10

He may have been aware of the gathering dark clouds, that He may have allowed them to accumulate, never dawned on the king.

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* has a lengthy discussion about the topic of the child's eating of curds and honey. The commentary continues: "The obvious and literal meaning of the prophecy is this: 'that within the time that a young woman, now a virgin, should conceive and bring forth a child, and that child should arrive at such an age as to distinguish between good and evil, that is, within a few years (compare Isa 8:4), the enemies of Judah should be destroyed.' But the prophecy is introduced in so solemn a manner; the sign is so marked, as a sign selected and given by God himself, after Ahaz had rejected the offer of any sign of his own choosing out of the whole compass of nature; the terms of the prophecy are so peculiar, and the name of the child so expressive, containing in them much more than the circumstances of the birth of a common child required, or even admitted; that we may easily suppose that, in minds prepared by the general expectation of a great Deliverer to spring from the house of David, they raised hopes far beyond what the present occasion suggested; especially when it was found, that in the subsequent prophecy, delivered immediately afterward, this child, called Immanuel, is treated as the Lord and Prince of the land of Judah. Who could this be, other than the heir of the throne of David; under which character a great and even a divine person had been promised?"

V.15 has been the subject of almost as much discussion and controversy as v.14, because of the meaning of the Hebrew word *chem'ah*, translated "butter" in *The King James Version* and "curds" in *The New International Version*. Also the literal reading of the Hebrew text: "Butter and honey shall he eat, that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good" has given reasons for dispute. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* comments here: "The other version, 'that he may know,' has no meaning at all; for what sense is there in asserting, that a child shall eat butter and honey that he may know to refuse evil and choose good? Is there any such effect in this food? Surely not." *Barnes' Notes* observes: "The more probable interpretation is, that it was the usual food of children, and that it means that the child should be nourished in the customary manner."

The obvious intent of Isaiah's words to the king is that before long, that is before the child to be born is old enough to distinguish between good and evil, the two kingdoms that threatened the invasion would be depopulated and destroyed. V.17 refers to the means of achieving this feat, which is the rise of Assyria which would conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel and take the people into captivity from which they were never to return.

ii. Divine judgment (7:18 – 8:8)

**18** *In that day the LORD will whistle for flies from the distant streams of Egypt and for bees from the land of Assyria.*

**19** *They will all come and settle in the steep ravines and in the crevices in the rocks, on all the thornbushes and at all the water holes.*

**20** *In that day the Lord will use a razor hired from beyond the River — the king of Assyria — to shave your head and the hair of your legs, and to take off your beards also.*

**21** *In that day, a man will keep alive a young cow and two goats.*

**22** *And because of the abundance of the milk they give, he will have curds to eat. All who remain in the land will eat curds and honey.*

**23** *In that day, in every place where there were a thousand vines worth a thousand silver shekels, there will be only briers and thorns.*

**24** *Men will go there with bow and arrow, for the land will be covered with briers and thorns.*

**25** *As for all the hills once cultivated by the hoe, you will no longer go there for fear of the briers and thorns; they will become places where cattle are turned loose and where sheep run.*

**Chapter 8:1** *The LORD said to me, "Take a large scroll and write on it with an ordinary pen: Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz.*

**2 And I will call in Uriah the priest and Zechariah son of Jeberekiah as reliable witnesses for me."**

**3 Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the LORD said to me, "Name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz.**

**4 Before the boy knows how to say 'My father' or 'My mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria."**

**5 The LORD spoke to me again:**

**6 "Because this people has rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah and rejoices over Rezin and the son of Remaliah,**

**7 therefore the Lord is about to bring against them the mighty floodwaters of the River — the king of Assyria with all his pomp. It will overflow all its channels, run over all its banks**

**8 and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it and reaching up to the neck. Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land, O Immanuel!"**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section: "Those who hate wisdom love death (Pr. 8:36). With open eyes Ahaz rejected the way of faith. What follows is full of biblical logic. The program has been fixed in verses 15–17: the decay of the countryside, the elimination of the northern powers and the Assyrian domination of Judah. Ahaz did not act 'unwisely' – he used every political skill, the garnered astuteness of years of diplomacy and worldly *savoir-faire* – it was just the wrong wisdom. The very things he trusted guaranteed calamity. Assyria dominates this section (7:18,20; 8:4,7). This is what Ahaz trusted and it will be his ruin. The section is made up of four *in that day* oracles (18–19,20,21–22, 23–25) and two *The LORD said/spoke* oracles (8:1–4, 5–8)."

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments on v.17: "The transition from promises to threatenings is abrupt, and calculated to impress any one who was to any extent impressible. But Ahaz seems not to have had 'ears to hear.' " Assyria, the very power on which Ahaz had built his hope for deliverance would come and dominate the country. The flies from Egypt and the bees from Assyria that would come to Judah in response to the Lord's whistling are, of course, more than common insects, they represent the same military power as the locusts in Joel's prophecy.<sup>1</sup> They may even represent demonic influences, as is seen from John's use of Joel's images in Revelation.<sup>2</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says about the flies and the bees: "The Nile inundation annually brought swarms of flies; Assyria was well known for apiculture." Naturalists, who have studied the area, report that the Abyssinia flies are a greater pest than the one we know. They are larger and thicker than the bee and approximately a quarter of an inch long. Evidently, these insects bred profusely in the Egyptian Nile Delta. They provided a clear symbol of what an invasion by the Egyptian army would be like. The Assyrian bees came because Ahaz had asked them to come for protection from Syria. We read: "Ahaz sent messengers to say to Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria, 'I am your servant and vassal. Come up and save me out of the hand of the king of Aram and of the king of Israel, who are attacking me.' And Ahaz took the silver and gold found in the temple of the LORD and in the treasuries of the royal palace and sent it as a gift to the king of Assyria. The king of Assyria complied by attacking Damascus and capturing it. He deported its inhabitants to Kir and put Rezin to death."<sup>3</sup> But Assyria did more for Ahaz than he had bargained for. The "shaving" of the body is symbolic for how they treated Judah. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes dryly: "And the Lord would have saved Ahaz for nothing! But, instead, worldly wisdom made him buy salvation – only to find out he was paying barber's charges!"

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1. See Joel 1:4.

2. See Rev. 9:1-11.

3. II Kings 16:7-9

Shaving of bodily hair was part of a ritual a leper had to submit to after he was pronounced clean.<sup>1</sup> But apart from that ceremony a clean shave such as described here was considered a humiliation, which is the meaning it has here.

Vv.21-25 seem to give a conflicting description of abundance and poverty; on the one hand the land will be covered with briars and thorns to the point where agriculture has become impossible, on the other hand there will be an abundance of milk and curds. Some Bible scholars believe that “abundance” is used ironically, but others understand that, since the farmer will have nothing else to do but to take care of his one cow and two goats, these will thrive. Whatever way Isaiah’s words are interpreted, the picture is one of poverty. If one head of cattle and two goats are all that is left in a land “flowing with milk and honey” that is not good. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Tiglath-Pileser, in his inscriptions, mentions his carrying off home cattle and sheep to the amount of many thousands from the countries which he overran or conquered.”

The mention of bow and arrow in v.22 suggests that the population of wild animals would increase to the point where they became a threat to the population. Jeremiah’s illustration indicates that lions populated the Jordan River area. We read: “Like a lion coming up from Jordan’s thickets to a rich pastureland, I will chase Edom from its land in an instant. Who is the chosen one I will appoint for this? Who is like me and who can challenge me? And what shepherd can stand against me?”<sup>2</sup> And Moses’ words suggest that the wild animals were a constant threat in Canaan. We read: “The LORD your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little. You will not be allowed to eliminate them all at once, or the wild animals will multiply around you.”<sup>3</sup>

Vv.1-8 of chapter eight cover the same ground as the previous chapter but here the Lord tells Isaiah to spell out the message in the form of several object lessons. The first was to be the drawing up of an official document. Isaiah was to write the name *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz* either on a scroll or a tablet and the Lord would call in two witnesses to notarize it. A footnote in *The New International Version* states: “Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz means quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says: “The name *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz* is impressionistic rather than grammatical: ‘Speed-Spoil-Haste-Booty.’ It is intended to provoke interest, leaving unanswered questions, but ‘spoil’ and ‘booty’ would suggest the invading foe, while ‘speed’ and ‘haste’ suggest unhindered advance: no thought of a fight ahead, only of the spoil awaiting.”

*Barnes’ Notes* explains about the way of writing: “The word ‘pen’ here *chereT* denotes the iron stylus, which was used to engrave or cut the letters in the metal or wood. The phrase ‘a man’s pen,’ has been variously interpreted. The Chaldee renders it, ‘Write in it an open, or clear writing, or an expanded writing;’ meaning that he should make it clear and distinct, so as to be easily read. The Syriac, ‘Write on it in the (usual) custom of men.’ The word which is translated ‘man’s’ *nowsh* usually denotes common men, the lower ranks, in opposition to the higher ranks of society. And probably the direction means simply, ‘write on it in letters such as men commonly use; in a plain, open, distinct manner-without using any mysterious emblems or characters, but so that men may read it distinctly and easily.’ ”

The second “object lesson” was the birth of Isaiah’s son to whom the name Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz would be given. It is not difficult to see the profound, but hidden, lesson in this event. At the moment God spoke to Isaiah, the prophet’s wife was not pregnant, just as “the virgin” in chapter seven was not pregnant when Isaiah spoke to the king. In both cases “the word would become flesh.” The message written on the document would be incarnate. But what a difference between the one baby and the other! And what a name to give to one’s child! It is one thing to grow up with the name Immanuel, but to be called “Speed-Spoil-Haste-Booty” throughout one’s life would be enough to send anyone to a psychiatrist. A little farther down in this chapter, Isaiah makes the statement: “Here am I, and the children the LORD has given me. We

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1. See Lev. 14:8,9.  
 2. Jer. 49:19  
 3. Deut. 7:22

are signs and symbols in Israel from the LORD Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.”<sup>1</sup> The irony is that the unbelieving King Ahaz received the good name and Isaiah the bad one.

Another interesting detail in this matter is that Isaiah calls his wife “the prophetess.” We are not told whether she ever pronounced any word of prophecy, but she prophesied by giving birth to this son. She became a prophetess in the order of the virgin Mary in the same way as the girl who would give birth to Immanuel in the previous chapter. In a way part of our prophetic ministry is that Christ be formed in us.<sup>2</sup>

V.4 – “Before the boy knows how to say ‘My father’ or ‘My mother,’ the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria” corresponds to v.16 in the previous chapter: “But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.”

Vv.6-8 depict the topic of the message under the pictures of two bodies of water: the Shiloah Brook and the Euphrates River. We know of Shiloah, Siloah, or in the New Testament, the Pool of Siloam from the story of Jesus’ healing of the man who was born blind.<sup>3</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* explains about Siloah: “The ‘pool of Siloah’ (... Nehemiah 3:15) was the tank or reservoir at the southwestern foot of Ophel, which is supplied with water by a narrow conduit cut through the limestone rock for a distance of 1750 feet from the ‘Pool of the Virgin’ on the opposite side of Ophel, in the Kedron valley. This pool itself is fed from reservoirs under the temple area, which have not yet been fully explored. It is probable that Isaiah uses the expression ‘waters of Shiloah’ in a general sense for the streams, springs, reservoirs, conduits, which supplied the temple, and were connected with its service. ‘Refusing the waters of Shiloah’ would then be, without any violent metaphor, refusing the temple service and worship, which was exactly what the Israelites had done from the time of Jeroboam.”

About the recipients of the message in vv.6-8 *Barnes’ Notes* comments: “There has been a considerable difference of opinion among interpreters respecting the ‘people’ to whom the prophet here refers. Some have supposed that it refers to the kingdom of Judah alone; others to a party in that kingdom; and others to the kingdom of Judah in connection with the ten tribes, or the kingdom of Israel also. The latter is probably the correct interpretation. The prophet reproves the whole nation of the Jews for despising the mild and gentle reign of the family of David, and for seeking the aid of foreign nations; the ten tribes as seeking an alliance with Rezin and Pekah; and the kingdom of Judah as seeking an alliance with the king of Assyria. It was characteristic of the nation—both of the ten tribes, and of the tribe of Judah—that they forsook the defense which they had in themselves and sought foreign alliances. Hence, God says, that he will bring upon them the judgments which they deserve. That there is a joint reference to both the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, is apparent from Isa 8:14. It cannot refer to the kingdom of Judah alone, for it could not be brought as an accusation against them, that they took pleasure in Rezin.”

It was at the Pool of Shiloah that Isaiah had his audience with the king in the previous chapter.<sup>4</sup> The king had worried about the danger of the water supply being cut off during a Syrian/Israel siege of the city of Jerusalem. From all outward appearance, it seems that Ahaz showed great preference for “the gently flowing waters of Shiloah.” God declares that the king actually chose the Euphrates over the water supply God provided for him and his people. The prophecy predicts that Israel would be swept away by the Euphrates in flood stage and that Ahaz himself would almost drown in it when the water would come up to his neck.

This prophecy is so multi-faceted that it is almost impossible to look at every face and implication of it in an exhaustive manner. At the breakup of Solomon’s kingdom, the new Northern Kingdom had separated itself, not only from the house of David, but also from the place of God’s revelation. Jeroboam had created his own religion, using the Name of the Lord as a cover.<sup>5</sup> In that sense Israel had “rejected the gently

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1. Isa. 8:18

2. See Gal. 4:19.

3. See John 9.

4. See Isa. 7:3.

flowing waters of Shiloah and rejoice[d] over Rezin and the son of Remaliah.” It was because of Israel’s “walking in the ways of Jeroboam and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit”<sup>1</sup> that the floodwaters of Assyria wiped that nation off the map. And although Judah did not physically abandon the place of God’s revelation, they did so spiritually.

The most fascinating facet of Isaiah’s prophecy is the use of the name Immanuel. It would ultimately be the Messiah who would hold back the flood of God’s wrath, not only over Judah but over the whole world, by drowning in it Himself. David expressed this in one of his psalms with: “Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.”<sup>2</sup>

iii. The believing, obeying remnant (8:9 – 22)

***9 Raise the war cry, you nations, and be shattered! Listen, all you distant lands. Prepare for battle, and be shattered! Prepare for battle, and be shattered!***

***10 Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us.***

***11 The LORD spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people. He said:***

***12 "Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it.***

***13 The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread,***

***14 and he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare.***

***15 Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be snared and captured."***

***16 Bind up the testimony and seal up the law among my disciples.***

***17 I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will put my trust in him.***

***18 Here am I, and the children the LORD has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the LORD Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.***

***19 When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?***

***20 To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.***

***21 Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God.***

***22 Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.***

Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: “The fact that Assyria will not prove to be the end for Judah prompts Isaiah to ponder the idea of a surviving remnant. In this way this new section integrates with what the prophet has already said, but it is of immense importance in its own right. Isaiah’s confrontation with Ahaz (7:3–9) hinged on the issue of personal faith, and Isaiah now sees clearly that the only future that matters for Judah is the survival of individual believers within, and in contrast to, the professing but merely formal people of God. This is the theme worked out in this key passage. Isaiah’s son (see 18) Shear-Jashub, who had been involved by divine command in the crucial confrontation in 7:3ff., has a name meaning ‘a remnant shall return,’ but is this a prediction of mere survival or does it go deeper?”

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5. See I Kings 12:26-33.

1. See I Kings 15:34; 16:19,26; 22:52.

2. Ps. 42:7

The commentary continues: “But there is another contrast besides that between God’s people and the world. The personal word of verse 11 is followed by plural imperatives in verse 12. Isaiah and those associated with him are marked off from *these people* (12). First, they are to live under the word of the Lord (11). *Hand* symbolizes personal agency and power. To say that *the LORD spoke* ‘with strength of hand’ (lit.) means with a compelling sense of a divine word to obey. The separation of prophet and group is not a self-appointed exclusivism but (as all true separation) obedience to the Lord’s word. It is obedience that is to distinguish them from *the way* (lifestyle, or characteristic modes of thought and conduct) *of this people*. The second difference (12ab) is their unwillingness to follow popular thinking regarding some *conspiracy*. It is possible that Isaiah’s action in opposing the king’s policy of alliance with Assyria was considered treason by the royal court and that a rumor was spread to this effect in order to bring him into popular disrepute. If this were the case, then *do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy* is a command to keep a clear conscience (1 Pet. 3:15–16).”

“Raise the war cry” is rendering of the Hebrew verb *ra’a*, which literally means “to spoil by breaking in pieces.” It suggests something bad. We find the verb for the first time in the story of Lot in Sodom when the two angels came to his house and the men of Sodom wanted to rape them. We read: “Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, ‘No, my friends. *Don’t do this wicked thing.*’”<sup>1</sup> The King James’ rendering: “Associate yourselves, O ye people, and ye shall be broken in pieces” is more a paraphrase than a translation. It may capture the spirit of the text but not the literal meaning. Judah tried to associate itself with Assyria, a covenant which, instead of providing protection, would lead to virtual drowning in a flood. A look at various translations of v.9 shows a shattering of translators as virtual as the text pronounces on the nations. A few samples will suffice to prove this point: “Be broken, you peoples, and be dismayed; give ear, all you far countries; gird yourselves and be dismayed; gird yourselves and be dismayed” (*Revised Standard Version*). “Be shattered, O you peoples, and be broken in pieces!” (*New King James Version*). “Do your worst, O Syria and Israel, our enemies, but you will not succeed—you will be shattered (*The Living Bible*). “The Assyrians will cry, ‘Do your best to defend yourselves, but you will be shattered! Listen all you nations. Prepare for battle — and die! Yes, die!’” (*New Living Translation*).

The Hebrew text has the name Immanuel in v.10. That seems to lend validity to the rendering of *The New International Version*, which makes Isaiah address the surrounding nations instead of Judah itself. Isaiah seems to taunt the attacking nations, telling them that their strategy will prove to be useless in dealing with God who chose Judah as the vehicle of His revelation on earth. To Judah, Isaiah proclaims that since God is with them, they have no reason to be afraid.

This leads into the section of vv.11-20 in which the prophet speaks directly to his own people, the chosen people of God who have abandoned their divine call.

Here again the Hebrew text allows for a variety of interpretations. “Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy” is the rendering of the Hebrew text “Say not a confederacy to all to whom this people shall say confederacy.” The Hebrew word *qesher* literally means “an unlawful alliance.” The word is used to describe Absalom’s uprising. We read: “And so *the conspiracy* gained strength, and Absalom’s following kept on increasing.”<sup>2</sup> Isaiah may be referring here to the alliance Ahaz had made with the Assyrians, which supposedly would protect Judah against the threat of invasion by Israel and Syria. “Say not confederacy” may then mean: “Do not think you are safe because you asked the Assyrians to protect you.” The only protection worth a dime is the one God can give you. The quotation from the Psalms in The Epistle to the Hebrews is appropriate here: “So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’”<sup>3</sup> In connection with this, Isaiah uses the Name of

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1. Gen. 19:6,7

2. II Sam. 15:12

3. See Heb 13:6; Ps. 118:6,7.

God *Yahweh Tsabaoth*, “the Lord of hosts.” The only alliance that will give us full coverage in life is the contract and policy God draws up for us and which He signs Himself.

Speaking about fear, Isaiah brings out whom to fear: “Do not fear what they fear!” As in the above quotation, wrongly directed fear can be as disastrous as a complete lack of it. God still resided in the temple of Jerusalem, as Isaiah had experienced recently in Chapter Six. God’s holiness had made him fear for his life. But the people were oblivious of God’s presence, which consequently they did not fear, and they feared an invasion that would never come to pass. Jesus speaks about the danger of wrongly directed fear, saying: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”<sup>1</sup> Fear of man and fear of God are incompatible, as pleasing man and pleasing God are. Which is why the Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: “Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

It is this incompatibility that would make the presence of God in the temple of Jerusalem a stumbling block and a snare for both Israel and Judah. Jesus would apply this to Himself, when quoting Psalm 118, He said: “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”<sup>3</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on vv.14b and 15: “To others the Immanuel-presence spells doom. *Stone ... stumble ... rock ... fall* are literally ‘stone of tripping ... rock of stumbling,’ *i.e.* careless of God, people ‘trip’ over him to destruction; *trap ... snare* express the watchfulness of the Holy God whereby each receives the destruction due. The rope stretched across the path, and the rock barring the way, should have warned them to proceed with caution but, ignoring and careless, they stumbled and fell. The same God in his unchanging nature is both *sanctuary* and *snare*. It depends on how people react to his holiness.”

Introducing the section of vv.16-22, Motyer writes: “Verses 16-22 review again the contrasting groups described in verses 12–14a and 14b–15. Isaiah and his group are guardians of the Lord’s *law*, deposited among them (16) for them to consult (19–20), practitioners of patient faith (17) and *signs* in Israel pointing to the right way (18). By contrast, those who refuse the word (20) forfeit the possibility of a fulfilled life (21a), alienate themselves from *God* (21b) and find nothing but darkness (22). The heart of the contrasts is *I will wait for the LORD* (17), *they ... will curse ... their God* (21).”

The words “Bind up the testimony and seal up the law” could mean that the scroll upon which Isaiah had written the words “Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz,” which had been notarized by Uriah and Zechariah (v.1) was now closed and sealed. There would be no more communication between God and the people. The only “Bible” left would be Isaiah and the children God had given him, his two sons Shear-Jashub and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. For most people, the only Bible they ever read is the lives of those who say they know the Lord. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews quotes Isaiah’s word, applying them to the Lord Jesus Christ as proof of His humanity. We read: “And again, ‘I will put my trust in him.’ And again he says, ‘Here am I, and the children God has given me.’”<sup>4</sup>

When the people refused the revelation God had given them, they turned to the enemy. King Ahaz had led the way in this. We read: “He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. He offered sacrifices and burned incense at the high places, on the hilltops and under every spreading tree.”

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1. Matt. 10:28

2. Gal. 1:10

3. See Ps. 118:22,23; Matt. 21:42-44.

4. Heb. 2:13

And: “Then King Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath-Pileser king of Assyria. He saw an altar in Damascus and sent to Uriah the priest a sketch of the altar, with detailed plans for its construction.”<sup>1</sup> Ahaz and his people rejected God, but they could not live without something supernatural, so they turned to spiritualism, consulting the dead.

The law clearly forbade the practice of spiritualism. We read that God said: “I will set my face against the person who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute himself by following them, and I will cut him off from his people.” And: “A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads.”<sup>2</sup> And: “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you.”<sup>3</sup> Isaiah does not deny the reality of a spirit world, but the text suggests that not all séances are what they claim to be, that is communication with a world of spirits of departed loved ones.

The two Hebrew verbs that describe the speech of the medium are *tsaphaph* and *hagah*. The first verb suggests a bird sound and the second some kind of meditation. We find the latter word in the verse: “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; *meditate* on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.”<sup>4</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests: “Tricks of the ventriloquists, probably, who disguised their voices, and represented that they were the voices of ghosts (comp. ... Isaiah 29:4).” The reference in Isaiah reads: “Brought low, you will speak from the ground; your speech will mumble out of the dust. Your voice will come ghostlike from the earth; out of the dust your speech will whisper.”<sup>5</sup>

The Old Testament believer held that death meant unconsciousness. David states in one of his Psalms: “No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?”<sup>6</sup> To be alive was considered a higher state of existence than being dead. As King Solomon expressed in Ecclesiastes: “Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!”<sup>7</sup> Yet, people would stoop to that which was less than they were. Over against this, Isaiah exclaims: “Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?” The meaning here is probably, why consult, not only the spirits of the dead, but also the dead idol statues, instead of going directly to the living God? “To the law and to the testimony!” is another outburst of indignation by the prophet. The law is, of course, the Law of Moses, and “the testimony” was also used of the Ten Commandments that were placed in the ark. The ark itself was called “the Ark of the Testimony,” as we read in the verse: “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.”<sup>8</sup> Isaiah calls his people back to the Word of the Lord and to the presence of the Lord.

*The New International Version* renders v.20: “If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.” The Hebrew text reads literally: “If they do not speak according to this word it is

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1. II Kings 16:3,4,10
  2. Lev. 20:6,27
  3. Deut. 18:10-12
  4. Josh. 1:8
  5. Isa. 29:4
  6. Ps. 6:5
  7. Eccl. 9:4
  8. Ex. 25:22

because there is no light in them.” *The Living Bible’s* paraphrase probably catches the meaning correctly with: “ ‘Check these witches’ words against the Word of God!’ he says. ‘If their messages are different than mine, it is because I have not sent them; for they have no light or truth in them.’ ”

The last two verses of this chapter depict the condition of those who involve themselves with spiritualism. These are people who rejected the light God had given them. They will vanish in the darkness they chose.

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* refers here to a passage from the Koran where the prophet is speaking of certain apostates from the faith. It reads: “They are like to a man who kindles a light. As soon as it begins to shine, God takes from them the light, and leaves them in darkness that they see nothing. They are deaf, dumb, and blind; and return not into the right way. Or they fare as when a cloud, full of darkness, thunder, and lightning, covers the heaven. When it bursts, they stop their ears with their fingers, with deadly fear; and God hath the unbelievers in his power. The lightning almost robs them of their eyes: as often as it flashes they go on by its light; and when it vanishes in darkness, they stand still. If God pleased, they would retain neither hearing nor sight.”

The Apostle John picks up this thought in Revelation, applying it to the Antichrist and his followers. We read: “The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.”<sup>1</sup> Some Bible scholars believe that these verses are out of place and should be placed in the following chapter. But there appears no reason for this in the present context.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* draws the following lessons from these verses:

“(1) They who try to make a spoil of the Lord’s people shall be themselves spoiled. But the Lord’s professing people must beware of forfeiting the Lord’s continued protection by having recourse to worldly stays, as Judah sought the help of Assyria, the pagan world-power, instead of relying on Yahweh alone. Such carnal policy is sure to bring with it its own punishment. The world shall be employed by God to scourge His people who lean upon it; just as the Assyrian, like an overflowing river, after having flooded Syria and Northern Israel, proceeded onward into Judah.

(2) But the people of God have in the name ‘Immanuel’ the pledge of their ultimate safety, however they may be chastised for a time. So in the last days, when the anti-Christian foe, with ‘the stretching out of his wings,’ shall ‘come in like a flood’ upon Christendom, and ‘shall fill breadth of Immanuel’s land,’ ‘the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him.’ However the kings of the earth ‘associate themselves,’ and ‘the rulers take counsel together,’ ‘against the Lord, and against His Anointed,’ their counsel ‘shall come to naught.’

(3) The danger to God’s people in such a crisis is lest, like Ahaz and his people, they should be betrayed into unbelieving panic, which would tempt them to conciliate the world-power by compromise. When the ‘confederacy’ of the enemies is the word oftenest in the mouth of the fearful, then Immanuel, ‘God with us’ (Isa 8:10), ‘the Lord of hosts himself,’ the only true object of fear, must be the watchword of His believing people.”

iv. The royal hope (9:1 – 7)

***1 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan —***

***2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.***

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1. Rev. 16:10,11

**3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.**

**4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.**

**5 Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.**

**6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

**7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.**

In the Hebrew Bible, v.1 of chapter 9 is actually the last verse of chapter 8. As death is not the last word for God, neither is darkness. Speaking to the Sadducees who denied the resurrection, Jesus said: "But about the resurrection of the dead — have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living."<sup>1</sup> And the Apostle John says about God: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."<sup>2</sup> God's first creative act in the Genesis' record of creation was to speak light into being.<sup>3</sup> When Jesus Christ was born, not only the Word, but the light also became flesh. Therefore, Jesus could say: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."<sup>4</sup> And the Apostle Paul writes: "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."<sup>5</sup>

Matthew quotes Isaiah when Jesus moved from Nazareth the Capernaum at the beginning of His public ministry. We read: "When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah: 'Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.'<sup>6</sup> The fact that Jesus drove out such a large number of demonic spirits that had possessed people in that area suggests that spiritualism was very much alive among them. Evidently, Jesus allowed Himself to be led by the prophetic Word to determine the initial place of His ministry.

Introducing these verses, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "The section of the prophecy commencing with ... Isaiah 7:1 terminates in this glorious burst of glad and gracious promise. The gist of the whole section is: 'Israel shall not suffer from Pekah and Rezin; her oppressors shall be Assyria and Egypt, more especially the former; Assyria shall overwhelm her, crush her, lay her low; she shall remain awhile in gloom and darkness; but at length the darkness shall be dispelled; a 'great light' shall shine forth, first in the north, then over all the land; 'the rod of the oppressor' shall be broken; a Child shall be born, who shall bear marvelous names, and shall rule over the full kingdom of David in justice and righteousness forever.' God has spoken, and God will perform this."

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1. Matt. 22:31,32
  2. I John 1:5
  3. See Gen. 1:3.
  4. John 8:12
  5. II Cor. 4:6
  6. Matt. 4:12-16

J. Alex Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section as follows: “Isaiah now reaches the fourth and final section of his prophecies about Judah. It follows in sequence from what has gone before. Waiting in faith and hope (8:17), the remnant is sustained by the forecast of the great light that shines beyond the darkness. It is a sure hope – so sure that, according to Hebrew idiom, it is even written in past tenses as though it had happened already. Because of this confidence Isaiah can place the light of 9:1ff. in immediate proximity to the darkness of 8:22, not because it will immediately happen, but it is immediately evident to the eye of faith. Believers walking in darkness can already see the great light and are sustained by hope. The passage includes a prose introduction (9:1), which acts as a bridge between the darkness of 8:21–22 and the dawning of the great light in the poem of 9:2–7, but this has been done so skillfully that prose and poetry are now thematically one statement in two part: the hope described (1–3) and the hope explained (4–7). Each part covers the same three topics in the same order.”

Isaiah’s intent went obviously well beyond the part of Israel that had been victimized by the Assyrian invasion. Darkness would not only be dispelled by light in one or two provinces of Palestine, but since “the light of the world”<sup>1</sup> would shine upon it, the whole world would be enlightened. In the words of the Apostle John: “In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”<sup>2</sup>

The Hebrew word, rendered “shadow of death,” is *tsalmaveth*, actually meaning “the grave.” It is the same word we find in the verse: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”<sup>3</sup> This whole section is a celebration of victory of light over darkness, of life over death.

Isaiah’s poetry is overwhelmingly beautiful. The way the prophet weaves together the threads of victory brings out the way God conquers Satan, not by superior numbers but by “weakness.” Isaiah proclaims here the foolishness of the cross in the various illustrations used. The Apostle Paul defines this: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”<sup>4</sup> The first picture Isaiah uses is the harvest. Jesus explained to the Greek who came to see Him: “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”<sup>5</sup> The victory of God’s harvest is the victory over death by means of death.

The second picture is of Gideon’s victory over Midian.<sup>6</sup> God mocked the world powers of Gideon’s day by defeating them with a handful of men armed with “toys.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments on v.4: “As Gideon with a handful of men conquered the hosts of Midian, so Messiah, the ‘child’ (Isa 9:6; 7:14-16), shall prove to be the ‘Prince of Peace’, and the small Israel under Him shall overcome the mighty hosts of Antichrist. Compare Mic 5:2-5, ‘Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little ... yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting ... And he shall stand and feed in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God ... and this man shall be the Peace, when the Assyrian shall come into our land.’ This passage of Isaiah contains the same contrast between Messiah’s seeming smallness as a child and His omnipotence as the Everlasting One, and alludes also to ‘the Assyrian,’ the then enemy of the Church, as here in Isaiah the type of the last great enemy.”

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1. See John 8:12.
  2. John 1:4,5
  3. Ps. 23:4
  4. I Cor. 1:25
  5. John 12:24
  6. Judg. 7:8-22

Some Bible scholars believe that “the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor” refers to “the custom among the ancients of placing a piece of wood, not unlike a yoke, on the necks and shoulders of slaves, as a mark of servitude.”<sup>1</sup> In His invitation, Jesus used the picture of the yoke to describe any burden that sin has laid upon mankind, when He said: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”<sup>2</sup>

The Hebrew of v.5 reads literally: “For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire.” The problem word is *ce'own*, the meaning of which is uncertain. *The King James Version* renders it “battle,” but the more modern view is to translate it “a military boot.” This is the only place in Scripture where this word is found. *The Living Bible* paraphrases the verse: “In that glorious day of peace there will no longer be the issuing of battle gear; no more the blood-stained uniforms of war; all such will be burned.” I prefer the Dutch rendering, the translation of which reads: “For every noisily stomping boot...” Having lived under Nazi occupation in The Netherlands during World War II, the verse evokes a picture in my mind of Hitler’s troops stomping heavily over the Dutch cobblestones. And at the end of the war, the principle of the high school I attended read Isaiah’s verses during the first chapel service of celebration. If only Adam and Eve had understood what Satan knew would happen when they ate the fruit that gave them knowledge of good and evil! It began with what was apparently a slight disobedience; it ends in human beings murdering each other. The stomping boot, symbol of terror and oppression, and the blood-splattered garment will be reduced to ashes through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus did more than die and come back to life; in conquering death, He defeated that which caused death: the sin of disobedience.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.” “Child” speaks of His birth as a human being, “Son” of His divine nature. That the two are combined in one human person is beyond our comprehension. Isaiah does more here than returning to the Immanuel theme. This is the miracle of the incarnation: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”<sup>3</sup> The fact that King Ahaz turned a blind eye to this awesome truth actually makes God’s light shine more clearly upon it. Although the emphasis is not on “us” it is for our sake that it happened; it is for the sake of Ahaz, of Judah and Israel, and of the whole world. It may not be about us, as the modern slogan states, but it is “unto us.”

This child is the King of kings. Every childbirth is a miracle to those who observe it. It is amazing that God entrusts His life to something as fragile as a newborn baby. The Son of the Almighty became a helpless little human being. He did not even make His entrance into the world as an adult like Adam. He was conceived as a single cell and grew up into manhood. Here also, the emphasis is on weakness.

*The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* comments here: “The child is born, not only because it was as certain, and [the prophet] was as certain of it as if it had been done already, but because the church before his incarnation reaped great benefit and advantage by his undertaking in virtue of that first promise concerning the seed of the woman, Gen 3:15. As he was the Lamb slain, so he was the child born, from the foundation of the world, Rev 13:8. All the great things that God did for the Old-Testament church were done by him as the eternal Word, and for his sake as the Mediator. He was the Anointed, to whom God had respect (Ps 84:9), and it was for the Lord’s sake, for the Lord Christ’s sake, that God caused his face to shine upon his sanctuary, Dan 9:17. The Jewish nation, and particularly the house of David, were preserved many a time from imminent ruin only because that blessing was in them. What greater security therefore could be given to the church of God than that it should be preserved, and be the special care of the divine Providence, than this, that God had so great a mercy in reserve for it? The Chaldee paraphrase understands it of the man that shall endure for ever, even Christ. And it is an illustrious prophecy of him and of his kingdom, which

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1. Barnes’ Notes
  2. Matt. 11:28-30
  3. John 1:14

doubtless those that waited for the consolation of Israel built much upon, often turned to, and read with pleasure.” For the sake of clarity we copy the references given: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”<sup>1</sup> “All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast — all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.”<sup>2</sup> “Look upon our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one.”<sup>3</sup> “Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary.”<sup>4</sup>

The Hebrew word for “government” is *misrah*. This word is unique in that in all of Scripture it only occurs in this verse and the following. “The government will be on his shoulders.” The Apostle Paul describes this reality as: “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>5</sup> And Jesus Himself testified: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”<sup>6</sup> It was the failure of this recognition that led to the demise of King Ahaz and Judah. And it will be the undoing of all people who do not believe that the authority they have is derived from Jesus’ omnipotence.

The four names Isaiah gives to the Messiah are “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The Hebrew text can be read as if it has five names, “Wonderful” and “Counselor” being two separate words. *The Living Bible* reads: “These will be his royal titles: ‘Wonderful,’ ‘Counselor,’ ‘The Mighty God,’ ‘The Everlasting Father,’ ‘The Prince of Peace.’ ”

The Hebrew word rendered “wonderful” is *pele*, which is derived from a word meaning “a miracle.” We find the word for the first time in the Bible in the song of Moses, sung after the drowning in the Red Sea of the Egyptian army. “Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you — majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?”<sup>7</sup> Alex J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says about the word *pele*: “It is the nearest word Hebrew has to the idea of ‘supernatural,’ here bringing a wisdom far above the human: the fulfillment of 1:26, contrasting with Ahaz whose decisions ruined his people; like but transcending, Solomon whose wisdom remained earthly (1 Ki. 4:29–34).” The best translation of the Hebrew word *ya’ats* in this context may be “guide.” “Mighty God” is the translation of the Hebrew *El gibbowr*. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggests the translation: “the conquering God.” The first time the word *gibbowr* is used in the Bible is in the description of the mysterious Nephilim. We read: “The Nephilim were on the earth in those days — and also afterward — when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were *the heroes* of old, men of renown.”<sup>8</sup> Everlasting Father is the rendering of the Hebrew *Ab ad*. And “Prince of Peace” is the translation of *sar shalom*. Actually, it can designate any person of rank.

It is obvious that Isaiah speaks here about a human being that surpasses in every respect the baby that would be born to the virgin in Ahaz’ court. This is the person Matthew understood to be in his quotation of Isaiah 7:14.

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1. Gen. 3:15
  2. Rev. 13:8
  3. Ps. 84:9
  4. Dan. 9:17
  5. Phil. 2:9-11
  6. Matt. 28:18
  7. Ex. 15:11
  8. Gen. 6:4

V.7 lays out the plan of conquest for the person described in the previous verse. The plan reveals what will happen, how it will happen and why it will happen.

The first thing that strikes us in the expression “Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end” is that it is not static. There is a continuous growth in the manifestation of Jesus’ reign on earth. A similar idea is expressed in John’s vision of the New Jerusalem: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”<sup>1</sup> God’s revelation of Himself in the bride of the Lamb is a continuing process. The darkness that was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter is dispelled as the light increases. Like the beginning of a new day, like the rising of the sun, light will increase until no darkness is left anywhere.

The prophet Malachi expressed this truth in a similar way: “ ‘Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,’ says the LORD Almighty.”<sup>2</sup>

The mention of David’s throne at this point in history would not have raised too many questions in the mind of Isaiah’s contemporaries. After all, Ahaz was clearly a direct descendant of David. As the dynasty of David declined, however, this prophecy became more and more the focal point of hope for the believing Jew. *Barnes’ Notes* comments here: “This was in accordance with the promise made to David; 1 Kings 8:25; 2 Sam 7:12-13; Ps 132:11. This promise was understood as referring to the Messiah. The primary idea is, that he should be descended in the line of David, and accordingly the New Testament writers are often at pains to show that the Lord Jesus was of that family; Luke 2:4. When it is said that he would sit upon the throne of David, it is not to be taken literally. The uniqueness of the reign of David was, that he reigned over the people of God. He was chosen for this purpose from humble life; was declared in his administration to be a man after God’s own heart; and his long and prosperous reign was a reign over the people of God. To sit upon the throne of David, therefore, means to reign over the people of God; and in this sense the Messiah sat on his throne. There is also a similarity in the two administrations, in the fact that the Messiah was taken from humble life, and that his reign will be far-extended and prosperous. But the main idea of resemblance is, that the reign of each extended over the people of God.” The Scripture references read respectively: “Now LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, ‘You shall never fail to have a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons are careful in all they do to walk before me as you have done.’ ”<sup>3</sup> “When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”<sup>4</sup> “The LORD swore an oath to David, a sure oath that he will not revoke: ‘One of your own descendants I will place on your throne.’ ”<sup>5</sup>

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, he quoted Isaiah’s prophecy almost literally. We read: “The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the

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1. Rev. 21:2
  2. Mal. 4:1-3
  3. I Kings 8:25
  4. II Sam. 7:12,13
  5. Ps. 132:11

Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew text of v.7 states literally that the Messiah will govern upon the throne of David and upon his kingdom “to order it and to establish it with judgment and with justice.” At the time of Jesus’ birth nothing was left of David’s dynasty. Jesus Christ had to restore it almost as from scratch. The prophet Amos predicted that God would do exactly that. We read: “In that day I will restore David’s fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be.”<sup>2</sup> At the first church council of Jerusalem, when the Jewish believers were confronted with the fact that a large number of non-Jews were joining the church, James, as president of the council, quoted Amos’ prophecy and gave it a worldwide application. We read: “The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up: ‘Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things.’ ”<sup>3</sup>

Isaiah says: “The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.” The Hebrew word translated “zeal” is *qin’ah* which literally means “jealousy.” We find the same word in the section in Numbers where the husband suspects his wife of unfaithfulness.<sup>4</sup> There is a clear connection between love and jealousy. The husband who exhibits the spirit of jealousy is hurt by his wife’s unfaithfulness because he loves her. In the first of the Ten Commandments, God says: “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a *jealous* God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.”<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew word for “jealous” there is *qanna’*, which is obviously related to *qin’ah* in Isaiah’s text. God’s actions are determined by the love for His bride. He gives Himself to her so that she will give herself to Him without any reservations. The Apostle Paul calls this “the blessed hope,” when he writes to Titus: “we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”<sup>6</sup>

c. Darkness and light in Israel (9:8 – 11:16)

i. The moment of decision (9:8 – 10:4)

**8 The Lord has sent a message against Jacob; it will fall on Israel.**

**9 All the people will know it — Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria — who say with pride and arrogance of heart,**

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1. Luke 1:30-33
  2. Amos 9:11
  3. Acts 15:12-17
  4. See Num. 5:12-14.
  5. Ex. 20:3-6
  6. Titus 2:13,14

**10 "The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with dressed stone; the fig trees have been felled, but we will replace them with cedars."**

**11 But the LORD has strengthened Rezin's foes against them and has spurred their enemies on.**

**12 Arameans from the east and Philistines from the west have devoured Israel with open mouth. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.**

**13 But the people have not returned to him who struck them, nor have they sought the LORD Almighty.**

**14 So the LORD will cut off from Israel both head and tail, both palm branch and reed in a single day;**

**15 the elders and prominent men are the head, the prophets who teach lies are the tail.**

**16 Those who guide this people mislead them, and those who are guided are led astray.**

**17 Therefore the Lord will take no pleasure in the young men, nor will he pity the fatherless and widows, for everyone is ungodly and wicked, every mouth speaks vileness. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.**

**18 Surely wickedness burns like a fire; it consumes briars and thorns, it sets the forest thickets ablaze, so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke.**

**19 By the wrath of the LORD Almighty the land will be scorched and the people will be fuel for the fire; no one will spare his brother.**

**20 On the right they will devour, but still be hungry; on the left they will eat, but not be satisfied. Each will feed on the flesh of his own offspring:**

**21 Manasseh will feed on Ephraim, and Ephraim on Manasseh; together they will turn against Judah. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.**

**Chapter 10:1 Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees,**

**2 to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.**

**3 What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches?**

**4 Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives or fall among the slain. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.**

The recurring refrain in these verses is "Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised." The chorus gives a haunting tone to the four stanzas of this prophecy of judgment.

J. Alex Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: "The prophets recognized the sad fact of the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel (1 Ki. 12) but never accepted it. Elijah, for example, in his counterattack on the apostasy of the northern kingdom under Ahab and Jezebel, took pains to build his altar on Carmel of twelve stones, naming each stone for one of the 'tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come' (1 Ki. 18:31). Likewise Amos, a prophet to the northern kingdom, spoke in the name of the Lord who 'roars from Zion' (1:2), included Judah in his condemnation of nations (2:4-5), and held out the great hope of a Davidic restoration (9:11-15). It is the same with Isaiah, the southerner. He accepts the fact of separate kingdoms, he knows that Judah will survive after Israel has been swallowed up by the great powers, but he sees their histories as running along parallel courses – their rejection of the Lord's word, inevitable judgment and the preserved remnant – culminating in the universal and endless reign of the same glorious King. The divided kingdoms of human sinfulness will become the one kingdom of our God and of his Messiah and he will reign for ever. He has traced out this course for Judah in 7:1 – 9:7. Now it is Israel's turn. The Lord's people sinfully corrupt his purposes but he never alters course or allows his promises to be rewritten (Nu. 23:19); all who are 'written unto life' (lit., 4:3) will be brought home to Zion through the same divine management of history and the same promised King." The reference to Numbers is a quote from Balaam's prophecy, which reads: "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind."<sup>1</sup>

1. Num. 23:19

In the message to Judah, called here Jacob, Israel is given as an example of what happens when people purposely disregard the Lord and His Word. Actually, the use of the names Jacob and Israel affirm the unity of the two parts; they are considered as members of the same body. In Paul's words: "God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."<sup>1</sup> God not only wanted Judah to empathize with the northern kingdom, but He wanted them to take what happened to Israel as a warning of what could happen to Judah.

In their attitude of pride and arrogance, Israel defied God. They did not recognize that their dismal conditions were an indication of God's displeasure and part of His judgment. Isaiah very appropriately uses the image of a brick wall or a house that is falling down. Bricks in the Middle East were made with clay and straw which were dried in the sun. They were not used for permanent building. The picture is that of a dilapidated condition. Israel vowed to replace the temporary structure with a permanent one, built of rock cut from a quarry. This is not necessarily about houses or walls; it is about security of life. What Israel was saying was that they did not need God for their safety; they could take care of themselves. The same principle is expressed in the picture of the trees. *The King James Version* calls them "sycamore," *The New International Version* uses the name "fig tree." The Hebrew word *shaqam* can actually mean any kind of fruit tree. Israel claimed that they would be able, not only to replace fruit trees with cedars, but to change one into the other, which would be quite a feat of creative ability. The gist of their boast was that their present hardship would improve their status. They would not only survive, they would come out on top. Israel was leaning heavily on their alliance with Syria, but Syria would be the first nation to succumb to Assyria and that would leave Israel an easy prey for its neighbors, the Philistines and the Arameans.

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments on the images of the bricks and the trees: "Bricks were the ordinary material for the poorer class of houses in Palestine; stone was reserved for the dwellings of the rich and great (... Amos 5:11). Sycamore wood was the commonest sort of timber, cedar the scarcest and most precious, having to be imported from Phoenicia ... The Israelites probably alluded to damage done by Tiglath-Pileser in his first invasion. The Assyrians were in the habit of actually cutting down trees in foreign countries, in order to injure and weaken them; but the present passage is, perhaps, rather intended to be figurative." The quotation from Amos reads: "You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine."<sup>2</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on vv.11 and 12: "Jeroboam II (782-753 BC) gave the nation prosperity, restoring the kingdom to Solomonic boundaries (2 Ki. 14:25), but what went up like a rocket came down like a stick and in no time Israel reeled under blow after blow. Its internal collapse (2 Ki. 15, 17) was seen in that six kings reigned during the final twenty years, four reigns ended in assassination and only one king passed the throne to his son. So much for replacing fig-trees with cedars!"

God's removal of the props on which Israel leaned for its security, failed to make them get the point. The fall of Syria did not make Israel turn to the Lord for help; instead, as we have seen, they boasted that they could do better without their ally.

In vv.13 and 14 God begins to apply His discipline to the nation itself. As Motyer explained, the cutting off of the head demonstrated itself in the breakdown of government. One coup d'état followed another and kings were assassinated as if that was the normal way to change the government of a nation. There is a direct link between what happened to the political leaders and the spiritual ones. The elders and the prominent men are called the "head" and the prophets the "tail." That means that the beast is turned around. The prophets, who were supposed to be God's mouthpiece, ought to have been the most important

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1. I Cor. 12:24-26

2. Amos 5:11

voice in the theocracy. When the young Elisha witnessed the ascension of the prophet Elijah, he cried out: “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”<sup>1</sup> He meant that Elijah’s going to heaven left the nation of Israel without the spiritual army needed for its protection. Nations are not safe because of the size of their armies, but because of the number of people who know God. Ten righteous men could have saved the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But the prophets in Israel were not real prophets; they were not the head but the tail. When God cut off the tail of the animal, the beast was still alive. To them applied what Jeremiah would later prophesy about the false prophets in Judah. God said to Jeremiah: “I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.”<sup>2</sup>

The wording of v.17 suggests that God would normally take pleasure in the sight of the nation’s youth. But in Israel’s moral decline caused by the lack of divine revelation and corrupt government, the young people grew up rotten to the core. That which ought to have caused God’s joy and compassion (the condition of orphans and widows) had become repulsive and disgusting to Him. As Alec. J. Motyer observes: “The Lord is not capricious; behind his fury lies his just appraisal of what the situation demands.”

The Hebrew text reads literally: “For every one is a hypocrite and an evildoer and every mouth speaks folly.” The Hebrew word for “hypocrite” is *chaneph* which is derived from a word meaning “soiled.” *The New International Version* renders it “ungodly.” *The New Living Translation* reads: “For they are all hypocrites, speaking wickedness with lies.” This statement places Isaiah’s confession, blurted out when he saw the Lord in the temple, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips”<sup>3</sup> in a clearer context. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines a hypocrite as a person who feigns “to be what one is not or to believe what one does not.” Jesus used the word “hypocrite,” (Greek *hupokrites*) seven times to condemn the scribes and Pharisees of His day.<sup>4</sup> The Greek word actually means “an actor,” someone who plays a role.

Wickedness, like death, has its own built-in mechanism of self-destruction. As a dead body destroys itself by decomposing, so wickedness burns itself to ashes, releasing heavy columns of black smoke that pollute the land making it hard to breath. This is not the fire that cleanses, but the inferno that defiles. Yet, it serves the purpose of God’s wrath in that it ends up by destroying the offense.

Isaiah depicts this as a cannibalistic ritual in which one human being consumes the other until nothing more is left to eat. Isaiah’s picture may be symbolic, but cannibalism did occasionally occur in Israel, as is evident from the story of the siege of Samaria during the reign of King Joram. We read: “As the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried to him, ‘Help me, my lord the king!’ The king replied, ‘If the LORD does not help you, where can I get help for you? From the threshing floor? From the winepress?’ Then he asked her, ‘What’s the matter?’ She answered, ‘This woman said to me, ‘Give up your son so we may eat him today, and tomorrow we’ll eat my son.’ ‘ So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, ‘Give up your son so we may eat him,’ ‘ but she had hidden him.’ ”<sup>5</sup>

Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: “How perceptive the prophet is: with all this evident domestic and social need crying out for remedy, there is still energy and resource to go to war! And yet no-one is *satisfied* (20a–d). The ‘grab-all’ society is a hungry place to live.”

The amazing feature in the last stanza of Isaiah’s chant, in the first four verses of chapter ten, is the hypocritical use of righteousness. Making of laws presupposes a system of righteousness that provides rights

1. II Kings 2:12
2. Jer. 23:21,22
3. Isa. 6:5
4. See Matt. 23:13,14,15,23,25,27,29.
5. II Kings 6:26-29

and privileges to the members of society. What is the purpose of the law if people live lawless lives? This amounts to giving lawlessness an air of legitimacy. Those in authority issued laws to camouflage their sin. Since true righteousness is related to the character of God, God takes this kind of lawmaking as a personal insult. As human beings we accept rules for every game we play. One cannot play baseball or chess without strict rules and regulations. The stricter the rules the more challenging the game! We accept this principle for everything except for life itself.

The Hebrew text reveals some of the customs of a judicial system that is foreign to our western society. The text reads literally: "Woe to them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed." *Barnes' Notes* explains: "It evidently refers to the judges who declared oppressive and unjust sentences, and caused them to be recorded. It does not refer to the mere scribes, or recorders of the judicial opinions, but to the judges themselves, who pronounced the sentence, and caused it to be recorded. The manner of making Eastern decrees differs from ours: they are first written, and then the magistrate authenticates them, or annuls them ... When an Arab wanted a favor of the emir, the way was to apply to the secretary, who drew up a decree according to the request of the party; if the emir granted the favor, he printed his seal upon it; if not, he returned it torn to the petitioner."

In the case of Israel and Judah the laws benefited the rich and punished the poor; they profited those on top and trampled those at the bottom. In his wakeup call, Isaiah reminds the authorities, the lawmakers, that the day of accounting is coming near. He depicts the lawmaker as the petitioner on the day of reckoning and he asks the unrighteous judge how he thinks God will treat him when he presents his petition. The conclusion is obvious. We will be measured with the measuring rod we applied to others. Jesus warns: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."<sup>1</sup> The Apostle John depicts this graphically in Revelation: "Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'"<sup>2</sup>

The prophet's chant ends with the refrain: "Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised." The meaning of this seems to be that the coming punishment of captivity, however severe, is not the end. What happens on earth by way of retribution is a shadow of the final day of reckoning to which the above quotation from Revelation refers. Jesus implied this in his denunciation of the Galilean cities in which He had preached. We read: "Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. 'Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.'"<sup>3</sup> Evidently, what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah on earth was not God's final Word.

ii. Divine judgment (10:5–15)

**5 "Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath!**

**6 I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me, to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets.**

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1. Matt. 7:1,2
  2. Rev. 6:15,16
  3. Matt. 11:20-24

**7 But this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations.**

**8 'Are not my commanders all kings?' he says.**

**9 'Has not Calno fared like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpad, and Samaria like Damascus?'**

**10 As my hand seized the kingdoms of the idols, kingdoms whose images excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria —**

**11 shall I not deal with Jerusalem and her images as I dealt with Samaria and her idols?'"**

**12 When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, "I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes.**

**13 For he says: "'By the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom, because I have understanding. I removed the boundaries of nations, I plundered their treasures; like a mighty one I subdued their kings.**

**14 As one reaches into a nest, so my hand reached for the wealth of the nations; as men gather abandoned eggs, so I gathered all the countries; not one flapped a wing, or opened its mouth to chirp.'"'**

**15 Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it? As if a rod were to wield him who lifts it up, or a club brandish him who is not wood!**

Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: "This brief passage, dealing though it does with a single historical event (the Assyrian invasions from 734 to 701 BC), is one of the Bible's profoundest statements on the nature of earthly history, the relation between the King and the kings. It corresponds to the Assyrian passage in 7:18 – 8:8. The passages coincide in affirming divine control over history (7:18; 10:6) but, while the former concentrates on the fact and effects of the Assyrian incursion, this passage asserts a philosophy of history, how the historical facts arise from hidden supernatural causes, and how the human actors who are the hinges on which history outwardly turns are themselves personal and responsible agents within a sovereignly ordered and exactly tuned moral system. From the literary point of view these eleven verses are a carefully crafted poem and a good place to appreciate Isaiah's skill as a wordsmith."

In v.5 God calls Assyria "the rod of my anger" and "the staff of my indignation." The two words are obviously related and used as parallels. The Hebrew word for "rod" is *shebet*, which means "a stick." Sometimes the word acquires a loftier meaning as in the verse: "*The scepter* will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word *matteh* has basically the same meaning. We find the word used at the place where God calls Moses to go to Egypt. We read: "Then the LORD said to him, 'What is that in your hand?' 'A staff,' he replied."<sup>2</sup> This staff also required a deeper meaning as we read when Moses obeyed God and left for Egypt: "So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey and started back to Egypt. And he took *the staff* of God in his hand."<sup>3</sup>

In Isaiah's text, the recognition of being an instrument in God's hand was totally absent from the mind of Assyria's king. He considered himself to be god, not God's instrument. The picture reveals at the same time man's foolishness and God's absolute control. The fact that evil opposes God does not mean that it threatens Him or even limits Him. There is no evil that can ever get the better of God. When God allows evil to exist and operate it accentuates His glory. I believe this is what Jesus expressed in the parable of the woman who baked bread, using yeast.<sup>4</sup> Yet, there is a way in which evil affected God beyond measure; in

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1. Gen. 49:10

2. Ex. 4:2

3. Ex. 4:20

4. See Matt. 13:33.

the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, God allowed evil to harm Him to the point of death. But that fact, more than any other, became the ultimate victory over evil and the greatest demonstration of God's glory.

But here is Assyria, being used by God, and not understanding it. World history is replete with empires, kingdoms and individuals that fit the same picture. The most prominent example of all is Satan himself. One of the most embarrassing discoveries we can make as human beings is that of "being used." Assyria's king thought all the time that he was winning the game. Only those who purposely present themselves as God's instruments and surrender their members as instruments of righteousness will be more than conquerors.

As Isaiah pronounced these words, Assyria was threatening Judah and Jerusalem. Israel and Syria had been conquered at this point and Assyria was supposed to be Judah's ally. But friendship was not what Assyria had in mind; the king of Assyria meant to gobble up Judah as he had the other nations. The king believed that he could treat Yahweh as a local deity, as he had the idols of the other countries. The fact that Isaiah pronounced these words in Jerusalem in the hearing of the king and the people proclaims a double message: one for Assyria and one for Judah. It seems that the message to Judah almost fell as much on deaf ears as it did to Assyria.

Describing the political situation of that time, *The Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* states: "When Hoshea, king of Israel, who had been placed on the throne by Tiglath-Pileser, refused to pay the required tribute, Shalmaneser attacked Samaria, the capital of Israel. After a long siege, Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BC, perhaps to Sargon II; and 27,000 inhabitants of Israel were deported to Assyrian territories. This event marked the end of the northern kingdom of Israel. Most of the deported Hebrews never returned to their homeland. Israel's sister nation, the southern kingdom of Judah, also felt the power of the Assyrian Empire. In 701 BC, Sennacherib, king of Assyria (705 BC - 681 BC), planned an attack on Jerusalem. However, the Assyrian army was struck by a plague, which the Bible referred to as 'the angel of the Lord' (2 Kings 19:35). Thousands of Assyrian soldiers died, and Sennacherib was forced to retreat from his invasion. Thus, Jerusalem was saved from Assyrian oppression by divine intervention." The actual direct threat to Jerusalem did not occur until the reign of Ahaz' son, Hezekiah. Shortly after Sennacherib's retreat from Jerusalem, he was assassinated by two of his own sons.<sup>1</sup> That was in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy here: "I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes."

In vv.13b and 14 Isaiah continues the description of the Assyrian king's musings. He compares his own imperialistic successes to robbing a bird's nest from its eggs. It is done so easily and rapidly that the mother bird has no time to chirp.

Because of his excessive pride, God puts him more down than reality warranted. A human being is never a mere tool without any personal initiative or intelligence. But failure to recognize the source of human dignity and authority will result in a total loss of both. If we do not willfully present ourselves to God as His instruments, He will make us tools and nothing more. Obviously thinking of Jeremiah's visit to the potter's house,<sup>2</sup> the Apostle Paul exclaims: "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? 'Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' 'Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?'"<sup>3</sup> The tragedy of the life of most human beings is that they never ask themselves what God's reason may have been for bringing them into the world. Consequently, God never reaches His primary goal with most of us.

iii. The believing, obeying remnant (10:16-34)

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1. See II Kings 19:37.

2. See Jer. 18:1-10.

3. Rom. 9:20,21

**16 Therefore, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors; under his pomp a fire will be kindled like a blazing flame.**

**17 The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briars.**

**18 The splendor of his forests and fertile fields it will completely destroy, as when a sick man wastes away.**

**19 And the remaining trees of his forests will be so few that a child could write them down.**

**20 In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel.**

**21 A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God.**

**22 Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant will return. Destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous.**

**23 The Lord, the LORD Almighty, will carry out the destruction decreed upon the whole land.**

**24 Therefore, this is what the Lord, the LORD Almighty, says: "O my people who live in Zion, do not be afraid of the Assyrians, who beat you with a rod and lift up a club against you, as Egypt did.**

**25 Very soon my anger against you will end and my wrath will be directed to their destruction."**

**26 The LORD Almighty will lash them with a whip, as when he struck down Midian at the rock of Oreb; and he will raise his staff over the waters, as he did in Egypt.**

**27 In that day their burden will be lifted from your shoulders, their yoke from your neck; the yoke will be broken because you have grown so fat.**

**28 They enter Aiath; they pass through Migron; they store supplies at Micmash.**

**29 They go over the pass, and say, "We will camp overnight at Geba." Ramah trembles; Gibeah of Saul flees.**

**30 Cry out, O Daughter of Gallim! Listen, O Laishah! Poor Anathoth!**

**31 Madmenah is in flight; the people of Gebim take cover.**

**32 This day they will halt at Nob; they will shake their fist at the mount of the Daughter of Zion, at the hill of Jerusalem.**

**33 See, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will lop off the boughs with great power. The lofty trees will be felled, the tall ones will be brought low.**

**34 He will cut down the forest thickets with an ax; Lebanon will fall before the Mighty One.**

In introducing this section in his *Isaiah*, Alec J. Motyer states: "As so often in Isaiah, the message is in the structure as well as in the content. In verses 16–19 (a1) divine judgment on Assyria leaves only a pathetic shadow of the once mighty nation, but judgment on Israel leaves a truly believing remnant (20–23; b1); thus through the Lord there is security of Zion's people (24–26; b2) but destruction for Assyria (27–34; a2). The two b-sections are wrapped around by the a-sections, just as the tiny Israel is surrounded by the opposing world ... The whole section is one of extraordinary vividness, with a telling illustration within each sub-section; wasting sickness forms an inclusio in 16 and 18, the irrecoverable decline of Assyria; the innumerable sand reduced to a remnant (22) conveys the grimly sad failure of Israel to capitalize on the Lord's promises; the historical incidents of Gideon (26ab; Judg. 6 – 9) and the exodus (26cd; Ex. 14) illustrate, respectively, the Lord's power on behalf of the tiny few and the helpless many; and the felling of the forest (33–34) describes the decisive divine victory over Assyria."

This section is obviously no longer addressed to Assyria but to Judah and its king. It is also clear that Isaiah's prophecy has a much wider application than to the immediate political condition of the world at that time. Not only was Assyria's destruction still a few decades hence, but the principle of victory of light over darkness reaches centuries beyond Isaiah's day. We can see how the present-day Arab-Israel conflict, that began in the twentieth century, fits into the picture Isaiah paints for us here. The mention of "the Light of Israel" that becomes God's holy flame applies to the birth, death and resurrection of Immanuel, to the victory of life over death, of light over darkness.

All this was said at a time King Ahaz had put his hope on Assyria's help to prevent an invasion by Israel and Syria. Isaiah's panoramic view of world history reaches to the fall of the Antichrist and beyond to the final defeat of Satan himself.

The burning of Assyria's thorns and briars by the flame of God's holiness can also be seen as an image of our own sanctification. When John the Baptist announced the coming of Jesus, he said: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."<sup>1</sup> When the Holy Spirit lets His light shine upon us and in us, we will be winnowed and cleaned and the chaff in us will be burned. Borrowing Moses' words, the author of Hebrews writes: "God is a consuming fire."<sup>2</sup>

Thorns and briars have become symbols of all that opposes the will of God; they are not part of God's original creation. Only after Adam decided to disregard God's command, God said to him: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field."<sup>3</sup> They represent the same spirit of disobedience that reigns in the empires of the world and in the human heart.

The destruction of thorns and briars is both instantaneous and a process. This is expressed in the two illustrations of the bushfire and the wasting disease. As the thorns and thistles appeared overnight through the disobedience of one man, so were they burned instantly through the obedience of one man. The Apostle Paul expresses this beautifully in his Epistle to the Romans, when he compares Adam to Christ. We read: "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."<sup>4</sup>

Of Assyria's mighty forest only a few trees will remain; so few a child could count them on the fingers of his one hand. *The Living Bible* catches well the symbolism of Isaiah's poetry with the paraphrase: "Only a few from all that mighty army will be left; so few a child could count them!" This section opened with the picture of "sturdy warriors" (v.16), so it is consistent to see those also in the image of the big trees. The Hebrew text actually speaks of "fat ones" which is the literal meaning of the Hebrew word *mashman*. This gives also more color to the picture of the man who is wasting away with sickness. It was ultimately the plague that decimated Sennacherib's mighty army overnight.

"As when a sick man wastes away" is a possible translation of the Hebrew text, which reads literally "as when a stand-bearer faints." The Hebrew word *nacac*, which means "a signal" or "something that gleams from afar," is only found in this verse in Isaiah and in Zechariah "The LORD their God will save them on that day as the flock of his people. They will *sparkle* in his land *like jewels* in a crown."<sup>5</sup> *Barnes' Notes* observes here: "There is here a great variety of interpretation. *The Septuagint* reads it: 'And he shall flee as one that flees from a burning flame.' ... The Vulgate reads it, 'And he shall fly for terror,' ... The Chaldee, 'And he shall be broken, and shall fly.' The Syriac, 'And he shall be as if he had never been.' Probably the correct idea is, 'and they shall be as when a sick man wastes away.' "

According to *Barnes' Notes*, some Bible scholars suppose "that by 'briars and thorns' here, the common soldiers of the army are intended, and by 'the glory of his forest' (Isa 10:18), the princes, officers, and nobles." The commentary adds: "This is, doubtless, the correct interpretation; and the idea is, that all would be completely consumed and destroyed."

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1. Matt. 3:11,12
  2. See Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29.
  3. Gen. 3:17,18
  4. Rom. 5:19
  5. Zech. 9:16

V.20 mentions the remnant of Israel. We remember that in Isaiah's original audience with the king, his son, Shear-Jashub, was present. God Himself had told the prophet to take his son with him. The Hebrew word for "remnant" is *she'ar*. The word *shear-jashub* appears, both in v.21 and 22. The presence of the boy was evidently part of God's message then as it is here. But here the words are addressed to Israel, the northern kingdom, as well as to Jacob, to Judah. As was mentioned before, God never recognized the divorce of the two kingdoms. To Him Israel remained the twelve tribes. The fruit of separation and estrangement does not grow in God's garden. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the living, not of the dead.<sup>1</sup> Death and all the other results of sin do not exist before Him; they are all swept away in the resurrection. And resurrection is what vv.20 and 21 are about.

Isaiah does not specify when "that day" comes. Since his prophetic gaze went well beyond the boundaries of his day, even beyond the birth of Christ and His resurrection, we may assume that this refers ultimately to the day of final victory.

God also distinguishes between what is His people and what is not. As the Apostle Paul states: "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel."<sup>2</sup> And at another place, he clarifies: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code."<sup>3</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, reflects upon the apparent contradiction in these verses: "There are two sides to the Shear-Jashub theme introduced in 7:4. On the one hand, there is the certain hope of a preserved remnant (21); on the other hand, the sad contrast (22) between 'the few that be saved' and the innumerable company of the divine promise (Gn. 22:17), NIV, however, does not offer the only understanding of verse 22. First, *only* is an interpretative addition, assuming that *remnant* here has a threatening sense. Secondly, *though* is not the most obvious translation of the preposition *ki'im*. It is usually a strong adversative, 'But (contrary to what you might have though)'. By itself, *remnant* in verse 21 would suggest a small number, 'but, to the contrary,' *your people* will be *like the sand by the sea*: this is the *remnant* that *will return*. In a word, the Lord will stand by his promises to Abraham and they will be fulfilled. In the light of this, *destruction* (and the related word in 23) could be translated 'consummation': *i.e.* the Lord will unfailingly bring his promises to their intended conclusion. The interests of the passage are, however, best served by preserving NIV (except for restoring the 'For' which should introduce 23). The Holy One who will keep his promises must do so in a way that is true to his holiness. Therefore, the destruction due to sin cannot be withheld, and it will come upon the *whole land* (23)."

However helpful this insight may be, the passage as a whole remains difficult to comprehend. The northern kingdom was effectually eradicated by Assyria and the threat against Judah would not subside for several decades. God did use Assyria, not only to chastise the kingdom of Israel but to wipe it off the map. God gives us His promises but He does not give us an account of what and how He does fulfill them. Some of our questions will never be answered. We read in Luke's Gospel: "Someone asked [Jesus], 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?' He said to them, 'Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.'"<sup>4</sup> God will answer us when we ask questions about personal guidance, but what He does with other people is none of our business. Reflecting upon our grandson's bout with cancer, my son wrote: "I was sharing with a neighbor how God has become such a mystery to me these past years. I love him deeply, but also respect and revere him more than ever. I cannot understand him and cannot believe I ever thought I could. He knows what is best and I continue to trust him with everything. Yet, trust does not imply understanding. It takes faith to trust someone when you

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1. See Matt. 22:32.
  2. Rom. 9:6
  3. Rom. 2:28,29
  4. Luke 13:23,24

don't fully know why he is doing what he is doing with what you have placed in his hands. That is certainly the case with my Lord."<sup>1</sup>

V.24 opens with the word "therefore." J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on this: "This is the astonishing force of *therefore*. If we were to draw a conclusion from the destruction theme of verses 22–23, we would proceed to declare Judah's fall too. But the Lord's 'therefores' are not the same as ours (55:8), and it is his logic which decrees that Judah will suffer but not be finished when the same enemy attacks whose power proved terminal for Israel. Three grounds of assurance are offered to bolster the command *do not be afraid*. First, there is the nature of their God. He is *the Lord (Adonay)* the Sovereign (6:1); *the LORD* (Yahweh, the God of the exodus who delivers his people and overthrows their foes) *Almighty* ('of hosts'; see 1:9), the God who is in himself every potentiality and power. Secondly, there is their standing with him. They are still *my people*, still those *who live in Zion*, the people of the Davidic covenant with its promises. This latter element is emphatic: *in Zion* would have sufficed to make the point; *who live in Zion* underlines it. The Lord is on their side (*my*), his promises will stand. Thirdly, they have the comfort of history, Assyrian domination is only *as Egypt did*—and please remember how the Lord dealt with that!"

One problem word in the Bible is the word "soon." It marks the difference between time and eternity. What God calls "very soon" (v.25) may be decades or millennia away. The Apostle Peter warns us not to forget that "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."<sup>2</sup> We must also remember that when God addressed Zion, there were members of the tribes that formed the northern kingdom who had migrated there because of the spiritual conditions up north. We read: "Those from every tribe of Israel who set their hearts on seeking the LORD, the God of Israel, followed the Levites to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to the LORD, the God of their fathers."<sup>3</sup> We can imagine that the destruction of their homeland did not leave them untouched even though they no longer lived there.

The threat of Assyria was felt as a heavy burden, even for those countries that were not immediately occupied by its army. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "The yoke of Assyria was heavy even upon the nations that submitted to her. She claimed to march her armies through their territories at her pleasure, and probably pressed men and cattle into her service. She exacted a heavy tribute, and otherwise distressed her many vassals." There is in v.27 a play-on-words that is virtually impossible to render properly in another language. Earlier the Assyrian soldiers had been portrayed as "fat ones," robust people. They waste away while Israel's neck becomes "too fat" to wear the Assyrian yoke. The Hebrew text reads literally: "and the yoke shall be destroyed from your neck because of the anointing." The Hebrew word rendered "fat" is *shemen* which is used to denote olive oil. We find it in the description of the inauguration of Aaron as high priest, where we read: "Take the anointing *oil* and anoint him by pouring it on his head."<sup>4</sup> It was God's anointing of Judah that guaranteed deliverance from the Assyrian yoke. *The New King James Version* sticks close to the Hebrew with: "And the yoke will be destroyed because of the anointing oil." According to a footnote in *The New International Version*, *The Septuagint* states that the yoke will be broken "from your shoulder."

There is in the promise of deliverance a note of discipline for those who will be delivered. This explains, in a way, the reason for which God allowed the oppression. We read this in the words of v.25: "Very soon my anger against you will end and my wrath will be directed to their destruction." The fact that Israel's deliverance from their four-century-long enslavement in Egypt is given as an example puts that period in a different light. The sword God used against Egypt was double edged; it cut Israel and Egypt at the same time. The repeated mention of Gideon's victory serves as a reminder that God does not need large

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1. From the website "Caringbridge" June 16, 2006.
  2. II Peter 3:8
  3. II Chron. 11:16
  4. Ex. 29:7

armies to be victorious. Midian's punishment at the Rock of Oreb is a reference to the execution of the two Midianite kings Oreb and Zeeb at that place.<sup>1</sup> Egypt's undoing was accomplished by means of the ten plagues and the drowning of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. The mention of these historical facts serves as a reminder of what God has done for His people in the past. This should boost their faith that He would do this again in the future. What is most difficult for us to accept is that, not only does God not let us get away with our sins, but we need hardship and opposition to reach His ultimate goal. We read that Paul and Barnabas encouraged the faith of and strengthened the disciples in the church of Antioch with the words: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."<sup>2</sup>

About the section of vv.28-32, *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "This graphic portraiture of the march of an Assyrian army on Jerusalem is probably not historic, but prophetic. Isaiah sees it in vision (... Isaiah 1:1), and describes it like an eyewitness. There are at present no sufficient means of deciding to what particular attack it refers, or indeed whether the march is one conducted by Sennacherib or Sargon. Sargon calls himself in one inscription 'conqueror of the land of Judah' ... and the details of the present prophecy, especially ver. 9, suit the reign of Sargon rather than that of his son, so that on the whole it is perhaps most probable that some expedition of Sargon's is portrayed."

Isaiah's description, whether historical or poetical, does not lack vividness and color. The prophet seems to describe the advancing army by looking through the eyes of an Assyrian soldier. Similar passages that allow the prophetic spirit to take flight are found in Deborah's song of victory, and David's lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan. Celebrating the death of Sisera, Deborah sang: "Through the window peered Sisera's mother; behind the lattice she cried out, 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?' The wisest of her ladies answer her; indeed, she keeps saying to herself, 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoils: a girl or two for each man, colorful garments as plunder for Sisera, colorful garments embroidered, highly embroidered garments for my neck—all this as plunder?'"<sup>3</sup> And David lamented at Saul and Jonathan's death: "Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice."<sup>4</sup>

Vv.33 and 34 describe how God stops the proud Assyrian army in its track. They are compared to a huge forest that is cut down. The comparison with Lebanon, which boasted famous cedar forests, was a common image. Ezekiel compared Assyria to a Lebanese cedar. We read: "Consider Assyria, once a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches overshadowing the forest; it towered on high, its top above the thick foliage."<sup>5</sup> Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: "A falling of a great tree is always dramatic; this one all the more so, following five verses of Assyrian vaingloriousness! Assyria, who was 'the axe' in the Lord's hand (10:15), now feels *an axe* (cf. 10:12). The view of history expressed in 10:5-15 is not wishful thinking but the sober reality of things, for *before the Mighty One* is (lit.) simply 'by a Mighty One.' The Lord is himself the agent."

iv. The royal hope (11:1-16)

***1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.***

***2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD —***

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1. See Judg. 7:25.
  2. Acts 14:22
  3. Judg. 5:28-30
  4. II Sam. 1:20
  5. Ezek. 31:3

*3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears;*

*4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.*

*5 Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.*

*6 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.*

*7 The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.*

*8 The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.*

*9 They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*

*10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.*

*11 In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea.*

*12 He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth.*

*13 Ephraim's jealousy will vanish, and Judah's enemies will be cut off; Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah, nor Judah hostile toward Ephraim.*

*14 They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west; together they will plunder the people to the east. They will lay hands on Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites will be subject to them.*

*15 The LORD will dry up the gulf of the Egyptian sea; with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand over the Euphrates River. He will break it up into seven streams so that men can cross over in sandals.*

*16 There will be a highway for the remnant of his people that is left from Assyria, as there was for Israel when they came up from Egypt.*

Isaiah's poetry takes away one's breath here. With the twenty-third psalm this chapter is one of the most beautiful samples of poetic verse in world literature.

When going through *The Book of Isaiah* in a systematic way, as we are doing here, one realizes how much is missed by taking sections out of their context. "The stump of Jesse" rises above the rest if we see how it follows the cutting down of the whole Lebanon forest of the Assyrian army. It appears even more dramatic is we see in God's dealing with Assyria a principle of how He deals with all pride and rebellion, both satanic and human. "The stump of Jesse" also reveals what God has done to the tree of David. God cut down His own tree; what He did to sinful humanity He did to Himself.

The picture conveys a warning. Jesus expressed this as He was on His way to be crucified: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then 'they will say to the mountains, ' 'Fall on us!' ' and to the hills, ' 'Cover us!' ' For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"<sup>1</sup>

The initial meaning of the cut down tree is, of course, that nothing but the root and stump is left of the theocratic kingdom of which David was the first member. During Saul's reign, Israel was not run as a theocracy. Saul did not heed the Word of God by the mouth of Samuel; he did what he thought to be good in his own eyes.

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1. Luke 23:28-31

Another interesting feature in “the stump of Jesse” is that it refers to David’s father, not to David himself. As Alec J. Motyer, observes in *Isaiah*, this implies that David is the one to be expected, making him an image of the Messiah.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments here: “From the local and temporary national deliverance the prophet passes, by the law of suggestion, in an easy transition, to the end of all prophecy—the everlasting deliverance under Messiah’s reign; not merely His first coming, but chiefly His second coming. The language and illustrations are still drawn from the temporary national subject with which he began, but the glories described pertain to Messiah’s reign. Hezekiah cannot, as some think, be the subject, for he was already come; whereas the ‘stem of Jesse’ was yet future (‘there shall come’).”

Isaiah’s words may have been inspired by an utterance in *The Book of Job*: “At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail. Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant. But man dies and is laid low; he breathes his last and is no more. As water disappears from the sea or a riverbed becomes parched and dry, so man lies down and does not rise; till the heavens are no more, men will not awake or be roused from their sleep.”<sup>1</sup> In Job’s words, though, there is no hope of resurrection. Comparing men with trees, Job concludes that trees win and man loses. In using Job’s image, Isaiah not only contradicts Job, but, in a way, he preaches the resurrection. Jesse’s tree became a stump in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, but its coming back to life means victory over death. The whole theme of this chapter is about a newness of life that supersedes our transient existence on earth.

Jesse’s tree not only branches out, it bears fruit. The Mosaic Law regulated that the first fruit must be dedicated to the Lord before the actual harvest could be hauled in. In the light of The New Testament we understand this to mean that Jesus’ resurrection is foreshadowed in the first fruit celebration and the birth of the church by the Holy Spirit is the Harvest Fest, which is called Pentecost.

*The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* has an interesting observation about the meaning of the word “branch.” The Hebrew word is *netser* which means “a shoot,” or, figuratively, “a descendant.” The commentary states: “The word is *Netzer*, which some think is referred to in Matt 2:23, where it is said to be spoken by the prophets of the Messiah that he should be called a Nazarene.” The verse in Matthew reads: “And [Joseph] went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene.’”

Vv.2 and 3 describe the character of the Messiah in terms which some call “the seven spirits of God.” The Apostle John elaborates on the theme of “the seven spirits” in *The Book of Revelation*.<sup>2</sup> J. Alec Motyer, in a footnote in *Isaiah*, states: “The OT has the same general revelation of the Spirit of God as the New: personal guidance (Is. 63:10; Eph. 4:30), distinctness (Is. 63:11; Mk. 1:9–11), divine presence (Ps. 139:7; Jn. 14:16–17, 23), indwelling (Is. 63:11; Hg. 2:5; 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19).” We understand that the seven spirits that are mentioned are seven manifestations of the one Holy Spirit of God. The expression does not mean that the Trinity would consist of nine Persons: Father, Son and seven Spirits.

The fact that “the Spirit of the LORD” rests upon Jesus presupposes His humanity. We read in the Gospels: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.”<sup>3</sup> Having understood this, we may assume that Isaiah’s whole description of the shoot that grows on the stump of Jesse’s tree is about a human being: the man Jesus Christ. The coming of the Spirit of God upon Jesus after His baptism is deeply significant. Jesus did not ask to be baptized in order to obtain forgiveness of sins, as the others did. For Him it was an outward sign of an inward decision to accept the role the Father had given Him as a man, which was to give His life as a ransom. As Jesus stated Himself: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to

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1. Job 14:7-12
  2. See Rev. 1:3; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6.
  3. Matt. 3:16

serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”<sup>1</sup> So, although most of Isaiah’s words here may pertain more to Jesus’ second coming than to His first, Jesus’ life, death and resurrection are included. They form the basis for His millennial reign.

The manifestation of the Spirit’s presence in Jesus’ life and ministry is given in three series of twos. Wisdom goes together with understanding, counsel with power, and knowledge with fear of the Lord. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: “All these characterize the true ruler: *wisdom*, the general capacity to ‘have a right judgment in all things’; *understanding*, the ability to see the heart of an issue (contrast the king of Assyria, 10:13); *counsel*, the ability to devise a right course of action, here coupled with *power* to see it through. Knowledge goes beyond ‘knowing about.’ According to 1 Samuel 3:17, the young Samuel, for all his religious involvement and the ‘knowledge’ it must have brought (1 Sa. 2:11, 18, 21,26), ‘did not yet know the LORD,’ for *knowledge* is enjoying a personal, intimate relationship with a person (Gn. 4:1, RV, RSV). When that person is the Lord, the relationship demands and prompts the *fear* which shows itself in moral concern (Gn. 20:11), obedience (Ex. 20:20”, sensitive conduct (Neh. 5:9, 15), loyalty (Ps. 2:11) and worship (Ps. 5:7).”

For the sake of clarity, we will spell out the references given in the last part of Motyer’s remarks: “Now Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.’”<sup>2</sup> “Abraham replied, ‘I said to myself, ‘ ‘There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’ ‘”<sup>3</sup> “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.’”<sup>4</sup> “So I continued, ‘What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? But the earlier governors — those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that.’”<sup>5</sup> “Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling.”<sup>6</sup> “But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house; in reverence will I bow down toward your holy temple.”<sup>7</sup>

The Old Testament links wisdom to fear of the Lord.<sup>8</sup> So, what Isaiah presents here as a sevenfold manifestation of the Spirit of the Lord is like a necklace the links of which fit together. He begins with wisdom and closes with the fear of the Lord. That the fear of the Lord has nothing to do with our concept of being afraid of somebody or something is obvious from Isaiah’s mention of delight in connection with that fear in v.3. The Hebrew word *yir’ah* does convey our concept of fear but is also has a moral emphasis of reverence. This is obvious from the Psalmist’s interpretation: “The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.”<sup>9</sup>

Jesus’ delight in the fear of the Lord reaffirms this humanity. As the second Person of the Trinity, the Son demands this fear; as a human being He experiences it. In order to understand how a human being can delight in the fear of the Lord we can compare it to the relationship Billy Graham had with most of the

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1. Matt. 20:28
  2. Gen. 4:1 (Revised Standard Version)
  3. Gen. 20:11
  4. Ex. 20:20
  5. Neh. 5:9, 15
  6. Ps. 2:11
  7. Ps. 5:7
  8. Job 28:28; Ps. 110:10; Prov. 9:10
  9. Ps. 19:9

recent American presidents. Rev. Graham must have been aware of the fact that his friendships were of an unusual kind. Few people befriend the most powerful ones of this earth. Billy Graham also knew, of course, that his intimacy with the Almighty rated higher than any invitation to the White House.

The fact that this sevenfold manifestation was bestowed upon Jesus as a man means that, through Him, it has been made available to mankind as a whole. Not only are we encouraged to come to Jesus because He understands and has what it takes to save and deliver, but He will share wisdom, understanding, counsel and power with us as we enter into a personal and intimate relationship with Him. This is part of the glory He promised to share with us. In His prayer for His disciples and for those who would believe in Him through them, He said: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew word, rendered in *The New International Version* “delight” is *ruwach*, which has a variety of meaning. It’s basic meaning is “to blow,” or “to breathe.” But it also denotes the enjoyment of smell. As such we find it in: “Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. The LORD *smelled* the pleasing aroma ...”<sup>2</sup> *The King James Version* renders v.3a: “And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD.” But most modern versions lean toward a rendering that conveys “delight.” Yet, the idea of comprehension seems to be present also, because in the following verses the Messiah’s ability to judge is elaborated on. In everyday life we often judge more with our nose than with our eyes. We say: “I smell a rat” in order to express our doubt about certain matters. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the hero says: “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.” And the Apostle Paul expresses our Christian character with: “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.”<sup>3</sup> We could say that God judges us by whether He smells Christ in us or not. We cannot fake an aroma. In *The Book of Amos*, God says: “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies.”<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew text reads literally: “I hate, I despise your feast days; and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies.”

The basic elements of judgments are glory and aroma. This may sound strange to us, because we tend to believe that judgment of both components is based on subjective attitudes. Since God, however, does the judging, it is the most objective judgment possible. The Bible defines “sin” as falling short of the glory of God<sup>5</sup> and the presence of the Holy Spirit as “the aroma of Christ.”<sup>6</sup> So judgment will be based on moral beauty and moral fragrance, neither of which can be hidden or faked.

The primary subjects of judgment will be “the needy” and “the poor.” The Hebrew words *dal* and ‘*anav* are not the same kind of synonym as they are in English. The Hebrew word *dal* conveys the sense of “being left dangling,” of being “weak or thin.” Its use in Proverbs points to a lack of protection, as in “The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor.”<sup>7</sup> *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* defines it as “one who is low, poor, reduced, helpless, weak.” The Hebrew word ‘*anav*, on

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1. John 17:20-23
  2. Gen. 8:20,21
  3. II Cor. 2:15,16
  4. Amos 5:21
  5. Rom 3:23
  6. II Cor. 2:15
  7. Prov. 10:15

the other hand, seems to point to one's emotional reaction to hardship, either by being depressed or gentle. We find it in the verse: "Now Moses was a very *humble* man, more *humble* than anyone else on the face of the earth."<sup>1</sup> *The King James Version* uses the word "very meek" to describe Moses' character. The whole gist of these two verses seems to indicate that judgment will be more upon motives and character than upon proof and circumstantial evidence. In a court of judgment on earth, motives and character play no significant role. Matters are decided by proof. God's justice penetrates where human law cannot go. The Hebrew word *tsedeq* for what is "right, naturally, morally or legally" occurs twice in these verses, once as his way of handling the case and once as part of his dress code: "Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist."

V.4b describes the authority of the Messiah with: "He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked." The Word of God is here represented as a sword. The first time this image is used in the Bible is in the story of Gideon. When Gideon's band blew their trumpets and smashed their jars to let the light of their torches shine, they shouted: "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!"<sup>2</sup> Their cry was their sword, for they did not kill any of their enemies but the enemy killed itself. David called upon the sword of the Lord when he prayed: "Rise up, O LORD, confront them, bring them down; rescue me from the wicked by your sword."<sup>3</sup> In the New Testament, the image is clear and complete. The Apostle Paul calls the Word of God "the sword of the Spirit."<sup>4</sup> The author of Hebrews writes: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."<sup>5</sup> The Apostle John depicts Jesus as having a sword come out of His mouth.<sup>6</sup> In all of these images we see the creative power of God's speaking. As God spoke the universe into being, so the Messiah establishes righteousness by the Word of His mouth.

The following section, which shows the result of the Messiah's reign makes us understand that it was the doubt of the Word of God that opened the door to unrighteousness which rules the world at present. It was when Eve and Adam paid serious attention to the serpent's insinuation: "Did God really say...?"<sup>7</sup> that unrighteousness took over and the balance of creation fell apart. The Apostle Paul beautifully describes this relationship between man's fall and creation's fall and man's redemption and the healing of creation: "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."<sup>8</sup>

The first thing we may conclude from Isaiah's poetic description of "the brave new world" is that the present condition of our planet is not what God wants it to be. When God has His way, the spirit that inspires cruelty in all of creation, both in man and beast, will be laid to rest. As *The Wycliffe Bible*

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1. Num. 12:3
  2. Judg. 7:20
  3. Ps. 17:13
  4. See Eph. 6:17.
  5. Heb. 4:12,13
  6. See Rev. 1:16;19:15,21.
  7. Gen. 3:1
  8. Rom. 8:19-22

*Commentary* points out: “The basis for this Eden-like harmony will be the full and adequate knowledge of God that all mankind will then possess, and that even brute creation will reflect (cf. Rom 8:21).”

It is because the earth will be full of “the knowledge of the LORD” that the infrastructure of unrighteousness will cease to exist. The Bible does not reveal how the animal world turned cannibalistic and that animals began preying upon their fellow creatures. We are told that the cause was that the key of knowledge of the LORD was lost, but how this came about mechanically, how animals developed claws and teeth that enabled them to tear each other apart, we are not told. It is equally difficult for us to understand what the world will look like when the condition is reversed. What we must know, however, is revealed clearly: *we* must know the LORD, if anything is to change at all. From Paul’s words in Romans, we understand that the resurrection of our body will be an important element in that renewal. We read: “Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.”<sup>1</sup> May be the animals will need new bodies also to reenter paradise. Who knows?

*Barnes’ Notes* comments here: “In this, and the following verses, the prophet describes the effect of his reign in producing peace and tranquility on the earth. The description is highly poetical, and is one that is common in ancient writings in describing a golden age. The two leading ideas are those of ‘peace’ and ‘security.’ The figure is taken from the condition of animals of all descriptions living in a state of harmony, where those which are by nature defenseless, and which are usually made the prey of the strong, are suffered to live in security. By nature the wolf preys upon the lamb, and the leopard upon the kid, and the adder is venomous, and the bear, and the cow, and the lion, and the ox, cannot live together. But if a state of things should arise, where all this hostility would cease; where the wild animals would lay aside their ferocity, and where the feeble and the gentle would be safe; where the adder would cease to be venomous, and where all would be so mild and harmless that a little child would be safe, and could lead even the most ferocious animals, that state would represent the reign of the Messiah. Under his dominion, such a change would be produced as that those who were by nature violent, severe, and oppressive; those whose disposition is illustrated by the ferocious and bloodthirsty propensities of the lion and the leopard, and by the poison of the adder, would be changed and subdued, and would be disposed to live in peace and harmony with others. This is the ‘general’ idea of the passage. We are not to cut the interpretation to the quick, and to press the expressions to know what particular class of people are represented by the lion, the bear, or the adder. The ‘general’ image that is before the prophet’s mind is that of peace and safety, ‘such as that would be’ if a change were to be produced in wild animals, making them tame, and peaceful, and harmless.”

It is generally assumed that Isaiah’s description fits the Messiah Millennium reign on earth. The fact that the passage is poetry does not mean that it ought to be only spiritually interpreted. Although the key to the transformation described here is spiritual (the knowledge of the LORD), this knowledge is expressed in physical and material conditions. The principle of creation is an expression of spiritual truth in physical realities. God’s image is expressed in the creation of two human beings, one male and one female.<sup>2</sup> “The Word became flesh”<sup>3</sup> means that God was born in this world as a human being. And the consummation of salvation will be achieved in the resurrection of our body. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “For in this hope we were saved.”<sup>4</sup>

We may also assume that the whole creation will return to its pre-flood vegetarian condition. “The lion will eat straw like the ox” must mean that there will be no killing of animals for human food anymore either. No roast beef sandwiches in paradise!

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1. Rom. 8:23,24
  2. Gen. 1:27
  3. John 1:14
  4. Rom. 8:24

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments on “all my holy mountain”: “As the Jewish Church is always bound up with the ‘holy hill of Zion,’ so the Messianic one receives the designation of ‘the mountain of the Lord’ (... Isaiah 2:3; 30:29; ... Micah 4:2), or ‘the holy mountain’ (... Zechariah 8:3). What was physically true of the type is transferred to the antitype, which is ‘a city set upon a hill’ in a certain sense.”

The words “for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” are also found in *The Book of Habakkuk*.<sup>1</sup> As far as the present knowledge of the LORD is concerned, our planet resembles the worst desert imaginable. Even those who experience some measure of intimate fellowship with God do not measure up to the condition Isaiah predicts here. The measure of knowledge of the LORD described here makes Noah’s flood look like a trickle. Most of us resemble David, who wrote: “My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”<sup>2</sup>

The first step toward this knowledge of the LORD will be in the forgiveness of our sin. As Jeremiah prophesies: “ ‘No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the LORD. ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’ ”<sup>3</sup> The flood of knowledge that will cover the whole earth will be the knowledge of atonement. Since there can be no forgiveness of sin without confession of sin, this knowledge will have to begin with a dramatic change of attitude in all of mankind. The Apostle John touches upon this in Revelation when he states: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.”<sup>4</sup> John’s quotation is actually from a larger text in Zechariah, which reads: “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land will mourn, each clan by itself, with their wives by themselves: the clan of the house of David and their wives, the clan of the house of Nathan and their wives, the clan of the house of Levi and their wives, the clan of Shimei and their wives, and all the rest of the clans and their wives.”<sup>5</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, asks the question in connection with v.10: “But how can one and the same person be both the *shoot* coming from *Jesse* (1) and the *Root* from which *Jesse* comes? This is an enigma unexplained until Luke 1:32.” We read in Luke’s Gospel that the angel says to Mary: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus emphasizes the same truth in the last chapter of the Bible, saying to John: “I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”<sup>7</sup> That the Messiah is the shoot or offspring of David is easy to understand; He is physically the son of David. That He is the root can only be explained in a spiritual sense. David’s throne rested on the fact that God had chosen and anointed him to be the human leader of a theocracy, a nation God had chosen to reveal Himself in this world for the salvation of all of mankind.

It is the Root of Jesse who will stand as a banner for the nations. The Hebrew word rendered “banner” is *nec*. It can mean any kind of signal or token. Significantly, the first time the word is used in

1. See Hab. 2:4.
2. Ps. 63:1
3. Jer. 31:34
4. Rev. 1:7
5. Zech. 12:10-14
6. Luke 1:32,33
7. Rev. 22:16

Scripture is in connection with the erection of the brass serpent when the people had rebelled against God in the desert. We read: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.’ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus referred to this story in His conversation with Nicodemus, saying: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”<sup>2</sup> The banner to which mankind will flee at the revelation of the Messiah will be the banner of atonement. This recognition will lead humanity into the rest which has eluded man throughout the ages. It will be the consummation of the quest of entering into the Promised Land.

Isaiah depicts this in terms of a return from captivity that had not even occurred yet. If this prophecy was given during the reign of Ahaz, Assyria had not even taken the northern kingdom into captivity and the Babylonian captivity of Judah was still farther away. Yet, Isaiah predicts here in poetical terms the return of the remnant, making it symbolic of a turning of the whole world population to the Lord.

Using images of the past to depict the future, Isaiah describes this return from captivity in terms that far exceed what would happen physically to Israel and Judah. Ever since Adam and Eve were driven out of Paradise mankind has lived in exile. This world that was meant to be our place of habitation has become foreign to us. Speaking about heaven and the resurrection, the Apostle Paul says: “As long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.”<sup>3</sup> And the author of Psalm 119 says: “Your statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage.”<sup>4</sup> The people of Judah represent all of mankind that seeks the Lord. They are, what the Apostle Paul calls, “the Israel of God.”<sup>5</sup>

*The New International Version's* rendering of v.13 does not seem to do justice to the parallelism of the text. The main Hebrew words *qin'ah* and *tsar* can be rendered “jealousy” and “trouble.” The word *qin'ah* is found for the first time in *The Book of Numbers*, in the chapter that deals with “the spirit of jealousy,” where a husband suspects that his wife has been unfaithful to him.<sup>6</sup> The word *tsar* can mean “enemy” or “distress,” as in the Psalm – “In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears.”<sup>7</sup> Most consistent would be to treat both words as representing enemies instead of emotions. In Israel, the worship of the calves became a rival to the true worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem. In Judah the enemy was God's archenemy, Satan himself.

Most Bible scholars, however, tend to look upon the verse as an expression of emotions. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, for instance writes: “Under David, the twelve tribes enjoyed a real if fragile unity. It was never so before him nor after him. This vision of reconciliation is part of Isaiah's forecast of David's return and the kingdom that will yet be (Lk. 1:32–33). This verse can be understood as a balanced statement: the jealousy Ephraim suffers (13a) and the jealousy Ephraim feels (13c); the enmity Judah suffers (13b) and the enmity Judah expresses (13d). Emotions (*jealousy*) and actions (enmity) of hostility are alike banished from this truly united people.”

V.14 sounds like a reenactment of the conquest of Canaan; this time executed in perfect obedience to the will of God. If this were to be interpreted in a literal sense it would strongly contradict the spirit of paradise in vv.6-9. Motyer observes about this: “This picture of warlike conquest by the united people jars

1. Num. 21:8,9
2. John 3:14,15
3. II Cor. 5:6
4. Ps. 119:54 (New King James Version)
5. Gal. 6:16
6. See Num. 5:5-31.
7. Ps. 18:6

against the vision of *the Prince of Peace* and the extending kingdom of peace in 9:6–7, but in fact what we have here is a consistent use of metaphor, not a forecast of events. It is exactly the same as the metaphor of the Christian armor (Eph. 6:10ff.). Kings customarily extend their kingdoms by armed conquest. Within the picture of the coming King, therefore, Isaiah envisages the spreading royal dominion: but the force to which the nations fall is that of the Prince of Peace, the gospel (Acts 15:14ff.). The reconstituted people of God are the agents in kingdom extension.”

In vv.15 and 16 the return from captivity is compared to the exodus from Egypt. As the Lord opened up the Red Sea for the people who left Egypt, so will he redirect the flow of the Euphrates (the River) that kept the people from returning to the Promised Land. As was noted before, there never was a physical return of Israel from the Assyrian captivity. These words must be spiritually interpreted.

d. The individual in the community: salvation, singing and proclamation (12:1–6)

***1 In that day you will say: "I will praise you, O LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me.***

***2 Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation."***

***3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.***

***4 In that day you will say: "Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted.***

***5 Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world.***

***6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."***

In introducing this chapter, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, writes: “This song forms the concluding bracket/inclusio to chapters 6 – 12, to which 6:1–13 is the opening bracket. Isaiah began with his own story: an individual who, though he shared in the deadly sin of the whole community, yet experienced salvation, a divine provision of cleansing leading to reconciliation and commission ... His address to Judah (7:1 – 9:7) and Israel (9:8 – 11:16) concluded with the same hope, the King whose coming would put all things to rights. In 12:1–6 we see the fruits of this royal work, a community in which each knows God’s saving work (1–2), all drink the saving waters (3) and share a testimony to the word (4–6). We notice, therefore, the first person singular (*I, me, my*) of verses 1–2; and the second person plural (*you*, coupled with plural imperatives) of 3–6. There cannot be a transformed community without saved individuals; nor can there be a saved individual who is not incorporated into the community.”

Bible scholars have seen a connection between this song of praise and the song of Moses and Miriam after Israel’s passage through the Red Sea. The mention of this historical fact in the last verses of the previous chapter provides a natural link. But there is also similarity in the words. “The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation” (v.2) and “The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation” (Ex. 15:2) clearly indicate that Isaiah borrowed from Moses.

We find in this song of praise a universal principle of salvation. The experience of salvation naturally leads to praise and to testimony. We saw earlier that Isaiah drew the consequences of his own cleansing from sin by answering God’s call: “Here am I. Send me!”<sup>1</sup> In this chapter the singer comes to the same conclusion that what happened to him must be made known among the nations. It is in the cleansing from sin that Israel will rediscover its call to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>2</sup> Israel’s salvation is meant to benefit the whole world. The salvation of each individual ought to make each individual a missionary.

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1. Isa. 6:8

2. See Ex. 19:6.

The immediate reason for this hymn of praise may be the averted Assyrian conquest under King Hezekiah. But the tone of Isaiah's hymn makes it applicable to every demonstration of God's saving grace, both for the individual and for the nations of this world.

The hymn opens with a reference to God's anger over sin. In Isaiah's personal testimony in chapter 6, we noted that Isaiah condemned himself when he saw the glory of God. God's reaction to Isaiah's confession of sin was an act of cleansing. Here, this cleansing is referred to as "comfort." "Although you were angry with me ... you have comforted me." The Hebrew word, rendered "comfort" is *nacham*, which besides meaning "consolation" also conveys a sense of "repentance." Isaiah uses this word 17 times in his book. Among others in the famous verse in chapter 40: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."<sup>1</sup>

In saying "Surely God is my salvation" the prophet says more than that God saves; God is what He gives, meaning He gives Himself. The Hebrew is more expressive than any translation can communicate. In making "my salvation" a proper noun, Isaiah makes it a Person. The Hebrew word is *yeshuw'ah*, which is the Hebrew form of the Greek name Jesus. We are saved in giving ourselves to God because He is salvation and He gives Himself to us. As in a marriage all privileges and benefits are related to the person one marries, (marrying a millionaire will make one rich, marrying a president or a king will make a woman a first lady or a princess), being saved by God will open up for us all the eternal riches of union with the Almighty.

There seems to be progression, more than repetition between the first and the last clause of v.2. "Surely God is my salvation" sounds like a profession of faith, a statement that helps to overcome fear. "He has become my salvation" is the testimony of an experience. Once the first statement was made, strength flowed into the weakness and we begin singing. Actually, "The LORD, the LORD is my song" must mean that it is God who does the singing and we join in by humming the tune. Music can do wonders for people who are depressed. Even the evil King Saul found relief in the harp playing of David.<sup>2</sup> But who has ever heard God sing! Real praise means joining the Lord in song.

In unparalleled poetical beauty Isaiah compares the experience of salvation to the drinking of water from a well. With our modern indoor plumbing drinking of well water has lost some of its attraction. For some Old Testament people the taste of water from a particular well encompassed all the sweet memories of childhood. David became homesick when he thought of the well in Bethlehem. His cry: "Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!" taught him a deep lesson of love, faithfulness and value of human life.<sup>3</sup>

Two instances in Jesus' life, reported in John's Gospel elevate the act of drinking water to the level Isaiah brings it here in his hymn of praise. The first one is in Jesus' conversation with the woman in Samaria to whom He said: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'"<sup>4</sup> In that conversation water is the equivalent of eternal life. The second instance, also recorded by John, occurred on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. On the basis of Isaiah's prophecy, on the last day of the feast, the priests would draw water from the pool of Siloam and carry it in a golden cup to the temple where it was poured over the sacrifice. It must have been during this ceremony we read: "On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to

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1. Isa. 40:1
  2. See I Sam. 16:23.
  3. See I Chron. 11:17-19.
  4. John 4:10,13,14

receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.”<sup>1</sup> Drawing water from the well of salvation means being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Whereas vv.1 and 2 are Isaiah’s personal testimony, vv.3-6 are a public exhortation and a prophecy. “You will draw...” foretells what will happen. It is a prophecy about what would happen on Pentecost when the church of Jesus Christ was born in Jerusalem. “You will say...” is an exhortation to praise and to world evangelism. It defines what missions and evangelism ought to be: a proclamation of God’s praise. The earth will not be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea unless we give ourselves to bring this about.

The essence of v.4 is knowing God. In a way God surpasses all human knowledge. This is clear from God’s call of Moses. We read: “Moses said to God, ‘Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ ‘ and they ask me, ‘ ‘What is his name?’ ‘ Then what shall I tell them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ”<sup>2</sup> “I AM WHO I AM” expresses the incomparable. God cannot be compared to anything or anybody else. The Apostle Paul states that knowing the love of God surpasses knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Jesus says clearly: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”<sup>4</sup> Calling on God’s Name does not mean knowing Him completely. But there are evidently unexpected blessing in reaching out for it.

V.5 concentrates on what God has done. Isaiah only saw from afar what God would do, and he painted the outcome as a panorama of a renewed creation. But, with the other prophets, he did not know the deeper meaning of his own prophecy. Even though later in his book he would describe the crucifixion, he cannot have understood the full extent of it. In Peter’s words: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.”<sup>5</sup>

V.6 addresses the people of Zion, that is those who live at the place of God’s revelation of Himself. Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: “For the last time the voice of verses 1, 3 and 4 speaks in feminine singular imperatives to a feminine singular (not *people* but) ‘inhabitant’ of Zion. The thought is drawn from Exodus 15:20–21, where Miriam led the songstresses in proclaiming what the Lord had done at the Red Sea (*cf.* 1 Sa. 18:6; Ps. 68:11). The masculine singular of verse 1 is matched by the feminine singular of verse 6. Thus this lovely song of joy in salvation is bracketed by a stress on the individualism inherent in the experience, but the contrasting male and female individuals embrace the rejoicing community (3–5): neither is valid with the other. *Zion*: Isaiah once saw a different Zion with different ‘daughters’ (3: 16 – 4:1), but now the promised cleansing (4:4) has happened and the *Holy One*, once estranged (6:3–4), has come (*cf.* 4:5–6) to live among his people.”

### III. THE KINGDOM PANORAMA: THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HAND (13 – 27)

#### a. The first series of oracles: sure promises (13:1–20:6)

##### i. Babylon: a look behind the scenes (13:1–14:27)

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1. John 7:37-39
  2. Ex. 3:13,14
  3. See Eph. 3:19.
  4. John 17:3
  5. I Peter 1:10-12

*1 An oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw:*

*2 Raise a banner on a bare hilltop, shout to them; beckon to them to enter the gates of the nobles.*

*3 I have commanded my holy ones; I have summoned my warriors to carry out my wrath — those who rejoice in my triumph.*

*4 Listen, a noise on the mountains, like that of a great multitude! Listen, an uproar among the kingdoms, like nations massing together! The LORD Almighty is mustering an army for war.*

*5 They come from faraway lands, from the ends of the heavens — the LORD and the weapons of his wrath — to destroy the whole country.*

*6 Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.*

*7 Because of this, all hands will go limp, every man's heart will melt.*

*8 Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at each other, their faces aflame.*

*9 See, the day of the LORD is coming — a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger — to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.*

*10 The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light.*

*11 I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins. I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless.*

*12 I will make man scarcer than pure gold, more rare than the gold of Ophir.*

*13 Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the LORD Almighty, in the day of his burning anger.*

*14 Like a hunted gazelle, like sheep without a shepherd, each will return to his own people, each will flee to his native land.*

*15 Whoever is captured will be thrust through; all who are caught will fall by the sword.*

*16 Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be looted and their wives ravished.*

*17 See, I will stir up against them the Medes, who do not care for silver and have no delight in gold.*

*18 Their bows will strike down the young men; they will have no mercy on infants nor will they look with compassion on children.*

*19 Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the glory of the Babylonians' pride, will be overthrown by God like Sodom and Gomorrah.*

*20 She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherd will rest his flocks there.*

*21 But desert creatures will lie there, jackals will fill her houses; there the owls will dwell, and there the wild goats will leap about.*

*22 Hyenas will howl in her strongholds, jackals in her luxurious palaces. Her time is at hand, and her days will not be prolonged.*

*Chapter 14:1 The LORD will have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose Israel and will settle them in their own land. Aliens will join them and unite with the house of Jacob.*

*2 Nations will take them and bring them to their own place. And the house of Israel will possess the nations as menservants and maidservants in the LORD's land. They will make captives of their captors and rule over their oppressors.*

*3 On the day the LORD gives you relief from suffering and turmoil and cruel bondage,*

*4 you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon: How the oppressor has come to an end! How his fury has ended!*

*5 The LORD has broken the rod of the wicked, the scepter of the rulers,*

*6 which in anger struck down peoples with unceasing blows, and in fury subdued nations with relentless aggression.*

*7 All the lands are at rest and at peace; they break into singing.*

*8 Even the pine trees and the cedars of Lebanon exult over you and say, "Now that you have been laid low, no woodsman comes to cut us down."*

*9 The grave below is all astir to meet you at your coming; it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you — all those who were leaders in the world; it makes them rise from their thrones — all those who were kings over the nations.*

*10 They will all respond, they will say to you, "You also have become weak, as we are; you have become like us."*

*11 All your pomp has been brought down to the grave, along with the noise of your harps; maggots are spread out beneath you and worms cover you.*

*12 How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!*

*13 You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.*

*14 I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."*

*15 But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit.*

*16 Those who see you stare at you, they ponder your fate: "Is this the man who shook the earth and made kingdoms tremble,*

*17 the man who made the world a desert, who overthrew its cities and would not let his captives go home?"*

*18 All the kings of the nations lie in state, each in his own tomb.*

*19 But you are cast out of your tomb like a rejected branch; you are covered with the slain, with those pierced by the sword, those who descend to the stones of the pit. Like a corpse trampled underfoot,*

*20 you will not join them in burial, for you have destroyed your land and killed your people. The offspring of the wicked will never be mentioned again.*

*21 Prepare a place to slaughter his sons for the sins of their forefathers; they are not to rise to inherit the land and cover the earth with their cities.*

*22 "I will rise up against them," declares the LORD Almighty. "I will cut off from Babylon her name and survivors, her offspring and descendants," declares the LORD.*

*23 "I will turn her into a place for owls and into swampland; I will sweep her with the broom of destruction," declares the LORD Almighty.*

*24 The LORD Almighty has sworn, "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand.*

*25 I will crush the Assyrian in my land; on my mountains I will trample him down. His yoke will be taken from my people, and his burden removed from their shoulders."*

*26 This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations.*

*27 For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?*

In introducing this part of *The Book of Isaiah*, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, writes: "These sidelong glances at the world dimension of what the zeal of the Lord will do (9:7) now become the main theme of the book. The 'great' powers of Babylon (13:1; 21:9), Assyria (14:25) and Egypt (19:1) are reviewed along with the smaller states of Philistia (14:29), Moab (15:1), Aram (17:1), Edom (21:11), Arabia (21:13) and Tyre (23:1). Over all of them the Lord rules in serene sovereignty, determining their experiences, appointing their destinies, purposing to bring the whole world together as one people (19:24–25) gathered (27:12–13) to himself. In the thick of this world scene the professing people of the Lord live out their histories, condemned for their failures (17:1–8; 21:1–14) and yet central to the glory of the day when the Lord reigns in Zion (24:23), the city of peace whose walls are salvation and whose people are believing and righteous (26:1–4)."

*The New International Version* introduces these prophecies as "an oracle." The Hebrew word is *massa*, which has a variety of meaning, from "burden" to "tribute" to "utterance." We find it for the first

time in Scripture in the verse: “If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its *load*, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.”<sup>1</sup> It can also mean a responsibility, as in the verse: “After Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy furnishings and all the holy articles, and when the camp is ready to move, the Kohathites are to come to do the carrying. But they must not touch the holy things or they will die. The Kohathites *are to carry* those things that are in the Tent of Meeting.”<sup>2</sup>

The question whether, in the case of the utterance of a prophecy *massa*’ ought to be rendered “burden” or “oracle” has occupied the mind of Bible scholar throughout the ages. The fact that the message may have weighed heavily on Isaiah’s heart ought to be taken into account. According to *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* the great seventeenth century Dutch philosopher Grotius rendered Isaiah’s words here: “the burden of the cup of malediction.” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The series of prophecies which commences with this chapter and continues to the close of Isaiah 23, is connected together by the word *massa*, burden. It has been argued that the term ‘burden’ is an incorrect translation of *massa*, as used by Isaiah and later prophets (... Nahum 1:1; ... Habakkuk 1:1; ... Zechariah 9:1; 12:1; ... Malachi 1:1); and that ‘utterance,’ or ‘prophecy,’ would be more suitable (comp. ... Proverbs 30:1; 31:1, where *massa* is thus rendered in the Authorized Version). But the facts remain that *massa* means a ‘burden’ in the ordinary sense, and that the prophecies to which it is prefixed are generally (in Isaiah always) of a denunciatory character. The translation may therefore be allowed to stand — at any rate in the present chapter.”

What Isaiah describes in this and the following chapters of this section can be called a lecture in divine political science. God allows Isaiah a sweeping panoramic view of the world powers of his day and of those in centuries to come. If we assume that this prophecy dates from the days of Ahaz or Hezekiah, Assyria was still a world power and Babylon only appeared on the horizon. Beyond that the vision becomes less clear. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “The oracle headings in the first section (chs. 13 – 20) are straightforward, but in the second section (chs. 21 – 23) they are (all except one) enigmatic, and it is only on reading the contents of each oracle that the nature of its subject becomes obvious. In section three only the changing topics indicate subdivisions. Thus we move with Isaiah from the definite present, the world around him (the precise headings) into the hazier future (the enigmatic headings) and on to the remoteness of the escahton, the Last Day where, from Isaiah’s perspective, everything seems to merge into one.”

Chapter 13 sets the stage for a war between the Lord’s army and the world powers, exemplified here by Babylon. David depicted the scene in one of his psalms, probably written when he captured the city of Jerusalem. We read: “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. ‘Let us break their chains,’ they say, ‘and throw off their fetters.’ The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ‘I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.’ ”<sup>3</sup>

We find the same theme in Daniel in King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, where the world powers of that epoch were crushed by the rock not cut out by human hands.<sup>4</sup>

Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, asks the pertinent question “Why did Isaiah begin his panorama of history with Babylon as the representative superpower rather than the more obvious candidate Assyria?” His answer: “First ... Babylon was far from being a negligible power in Isaiah’s time. Twice, under Merodach-Baladan, it established its independence in the face of Assyrian dominance, and it would have take very astute political judgment to say which would come out best in the Mesopotamian power stakes. Secondly, Isaiah knew that Judah would one day be overthrown and scattered (6:9–13) and he came to know that this

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1. Ex. 23:5
  2. Num. 4:15
  3. Ps. 2:1-6
  4. Dan. 2:26-45

destroying power would not be Assyria (*cf.* 8:8; 36 – 37). There was a dark power in the shadows, biding its time. In due course (39:1–8) it was revealed to him that that power was Babylon. In the ultimate, therefore, Babylon is a more significant candidate for superpower status than Assyria. But, thirdly, humanity’s bid to organize life and create security and stability by its own resources and without reference to God began at Shinar/Babel (Gn. 11:1–9). More than any other name, therefore, ‘Babylon’ typifies humankind’s will to be its own savior.”

There are several ways to look at these verses. Most Bible scholars interpret the people called upon to be the Medes and Persians who conquered Babylon. The words “my holy ones” would then mean that they were set apart for God’s service, not that they became partakers in God’s holiness. Another way of looking at the vision is to see the addressed as a heavenly army that fights the actual battle in the heavenly regions and determines from above what happens below. John describes this in Revelation: “And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down — that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.”<sup>1</sup> Probably the best way of interpreting these verses is to see a double image in them, one in heaven and one on earth. The fact that the following chapter seems to describe the fall of Lucifer himself, more than the fall of the king of Babylon, pleads for this view.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “It is remarkable that Isaiah does not foretell here the Jews’ captivity in Babylon, but presupposes that event, and throws himself beyond, predicting another event still more future, the overthrow of the city of Israel’s oppressors. It was now 174 years before the event.”

In vv.1 and 2 God is obviously the one speaking; in vv. 3 and 4 we hear Isaiah’s excited voice as he becomes personally involved in the message. God is the one who raises the banner on a bare hilltop. *The King James Version* renders it “high mountain.” But the Hebrew word *shaphah* has more the meaning of “bare.” It is not far-fetched to think of the bare hilltop on which God’s ultimate victory was won, when Jesus Christ died on a cross on Golgotha. After all, Isaiah speaks about much more than the fall of Babylon by the hands of the Medes and Persians. That event was only a shadow of the day of the LORD.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states about “The Day of the LORD”: “The idea is a common Old Testament one. It denotes the consummation of the kingdom of God and the absolute cessation of all attacks upon it (Isa 2:12; 13:6,9; 34:8; Ezek 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:11; Amos 5:18; Zeph 1:14; Zech 14:1) It is a ‘day of visitation’ (Isa 10:3), a day ‘of the wrath of Yahweh’ (Ezek 7:19), a ‘great day of Yahweh’ (Zeph 1:14). The entire conception in the Old Testament is dark and foreboding.” The *Encyclopaedia* continues to state that in the New Testament “The entire conception of that day centers ... in Christ and points to the everlasting establishment of the kingdom of heaven, from which sin will be forever eliminated, and in which the antithesis between Nature and grace will be changed into an everlasting synthesis.” Alex J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says about this: “ ‘The Day’ is the culmination and termination of history. Step by step Isaiah depict its seven aspects: it is the Day when the Lord implements his wrath (2–3), marked by worldwide mutual destruction (4–5) from which there is no defense (6–8); it is cosmic in its effect (9–10), moral in its motivation (11); it reverses the work of creation (12–13); there is no escape, only horrific suffering (14–16).”

The Apostle John seems to follow the same pattern in Revelation, particularly in the chapters that deal with the bowls of wrath.<sup>2</sup> That is the place where we read: “Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.”<sup>3</sup> Isaiah looks particularly at those who oppose God and are suddenly confronted with His presence. He describes their panic as the sudden onset of labor pains. Jesus

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1. Rev. 12:7-9
  2. Rev. 16
  3. Rev. 16:16

used the same image in connection with believers, but with quite a different emphasis. He said to His disciples: “I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”<sup>1</sup> The people in Isaiah’s vision suffer the double ignominy of pain and loss of virility. Labor pains are supposed to be reserved for women; men in labor do not give birth to children.

From John’s account in Revelation, we deduct that much of the world’s suffering in the Day of the Lord is manmade. The rise of the Antichrist will bring war with its famine, destruction and death. Men will call upon Satan and his demons in order to achieve their goals. And God will demonstrate His wrath by allowing them to do as they wish. John depicts the first scene under the image of the breaking of seven seals,<sup>2</sup> the second as the blowing of seven trumpets,<sup>3</sup> and the third as the pouring out of seven bowls of God’s wrath.<sup>4</sup>

V.10 in Isaiah’s prophecy corresponds to John’s words: “I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”<sup>5</sup> This disintegration of the universe can only mean the end of the world. It also means the end of human arrogance and pride and resistance against God. Human ruthlessness in v.11 is matched by the wrath and burning anger of the Almighty in v.13. “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”<sup>6</sup> This will be, in the words of Jonathan Edwards: “Sinners in the hands of an angry God.”

The question how this outburst of God’s anger can be reconciled with God’s love become clear when we keep in mind that man ultimately does this to himself. We declared war on God and those who reject His offer of peace suffer the consequences. Keeping the image of modern warfare, we can say that *Yahweh Tsabaaowt*, the Supreme Commander, surrendered to the enemy and allowed himself to be taken a prisoner of war. He was court-martialed and executed, but the enemy decided to keep fighting.

Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on vv.14–16: “‘No escape.’ The picture of gathering with which the poem began (2–5) is balanced at the end by this picture of scattering. In turn the verses reveal three facets of the Day: no protection (14) and nowhere to flee to (15), no mercy (16). They gathered in arrogant triumphalism (3–5), now they have everything to flee from (14) and nowhere to flee to (15). Humankind without God is without safety and without home.”

We assume that these verses particularly describe the defeat of the Babylonian Empire. In Isaiah’s day it had not risen yet to the status of a world power. The captivity of Judah was still far in the future. The Bible does not give us much information about their arrogant cruelty. From a Psalm, written during this captivity, we assume that they massacred infants in the most merciless manner. We deduct this from the Psalmist’s cry of revenge: “O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us — he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.”<sup>7</sup> Isaiah predicts this payback in v.16: “Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be looted and their wives ravished.” Evidently, that is how Babylon would treat their conquered foes. That is what the Nazis did with some Jewish babies!

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1. John 16:20-22

2. See Rev. 4:1-8:15.

3. See Rev. 8:16-15:4.

4. See Rev. 15:5-19:21.

5. Rev. 6:12-14

6. Heb. 10:31

7. Ps. 137:8,9

Introducing vv.17-22, Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “Having announced and described the Day of the Lord, Isaiah turns to the foreseen fall of Babylon. It is typical of the Old Testament to see coming calamity against the backdrop of ultimate calamity. Just as every next king was eyed with the keen hope that he might be the promised king, so envisaged turmoil raised the question whether it might be the Last Battle; in any case, many of the same issues are involved.”

Isaiah’s prediction of the way Babylon would be reduced to rubble is a most amazing piece of prophetic insight. As we mentioned before, at the time this prophecy, Babylon was just appearing on the horizon as an aspiring world power. As *Halley’s Bible Handbook* states about the time of this prophecy: “In Isaiah’s time Assyria was the dominant power of the world. Babylon was a dependency of Assyria. Babylon rose to World-Power 606 B C, and fell 536 B C. Thus Isaiah sang of the Fall of Babylon a hundred years before its rise.” Even more amazing is the mention of the Medes in this context. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments about this: “Isaiah’s knowledge that the Medes should take a leading part in the destruction of Babylon is, no doubt, as surprising a fact as almost any other in the entire range of prophetic foresight, or insight, as set before us in Scripture. The Medes were known to Moses as an ancient nation of some importance (...Genesis 10:2); but since his time had been unmentioned by any sacred writer; and, as a *living* nation, had only just come within the range of Israelite vision, by the fact that, when Sargon deported the Samaritans from Samaria, he placed some of them ‘in the cities of the Medes’ (...2 Kings 17:6). The Assyrians had become acquainted with them somewhat more than a century earlier, and had made frequent incursions into their country, finding them a weak and divided people, under the government of a large number of petty chiefs. Sargon had conquered a portion of the tribes, and placed prefects in the cities; at the same time planting colonists in them from other parts of the empire. That, when the weakness of Media was being thus made apparent, Isaiah should have foreseen its coming greatness can only be accounted for by his having received a Divine communication on the subject.”

The Medes will play an important part in the later chapters of Isaiah in connection with the promised return of the captives from Babylonia.

Historically, the Medes go far back. *Barnes’ Notes* explains: “Media was a country east of Assyria, which is supposed to have been populated by the descendants of Madai, son of Japheth (Gen 10:2). Ancient Media extended on the west and south of the Caspian Sea, from Armenia, on the north, to Faristan or Persia proper, on the south.”

The attack of the Medes and Persians upon Babylon, which ended in the overthrow of the empire, was the result of God’s stirring them up. As we have seen earlier, God sets the boundaries of evil and He takes away the restraints. He used Assyria to punish Israel for her sins, and He punished Assyria for enjoying its role as “the rod of God’s anger.”<sup>1</sup> In the same manner, Babylon will be punished, even though she served as the instrument of God’s wrath.

Jeremiah would, one century later, take up Isaiah’s cry: “Sharpen the arrows, take up the shields! The LORD has stirred up the kings of the Medes, because his purpose is to destroy Babylon. The LORD will take vengeance, vengeance for his temple. Prepare the nations for battle against her — the kings of the Medes, their governors and all their officials, and all the countries they rule.”<sup>2</sup>

Part of Babylon’s thirst for power was greed. When King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, he first stripped the temple of its gold and took the temple treasure back to his palace. Isaiah predicts about the Medes that they are not interested in a treasure hunt. They wanted pure and unadulterated power for power’s sake. They could not be bought off or bribed. They would be merciless and cruel even in their treatment of infants and children. The Babylonians who had dashed Jewish children to pieces would see the same treatment being given to their own offspring.

The comparison between the destruction of Babylon and the fate of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah lies in the fact that both areas were turned into uninhabitable terrain. The crimes of Babylon were

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1. See Isa. 10:5-19.

2. Jer. 51:11,28

not the same as of the men of Sodom and the end result of Babylon's fall was not another Dead Sea. Jeremiah echoed Isaiah's words one century later when he predicted the fall of Babylon; we read: " 'As Sodom and Gomorrah were overthrown, along with their neighboring towns,' says the LORD, 'so no one will live there; no man will dwell in it.' "1

Babylon's location was within the boundaries of Paradise. We find mention of the Euphrates River in both places. About Paradise we read: "A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates."<2 And Cyrus captured the city of Babylon by diverting the water of the Euphrates and walking his army into the city by the riverbed.

This place that served as the cradle of the human race, the place where man walked with God, would be turned into a desert where human life would no longer be found. That is what happens when the measure of human sin is filled to the brim. The animals that will inhabit the place are reminiscent of the presence of demons. Where God withdraws His presence, Satan will fill the void.

In introducing Chapter Fourteen, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, compares the high-spirited prophecy with the historical events that would only partly fulfill God's intent. We read: "Here is a vision of a new world in which co-operation has replaced animosity. It is the new Day of the Lord in which the insensate passion for mutual destruction has been replaced by unity (1de), and hostility by helpfulness (2ab). But behind this display of a new humanity there is divine initiative (compassion), choice and settlement (1abc). What actually happened at the return from Babylon (539 BC) in no way fulfilled this: Cyrus, like many a soldier turned politician, replaced the sword in his hand by the tongue in his cheek (Ezra 1:2-4) and did what was to his own advantage under guise of piety. There was no international acclaim or will to help, no reversal of the captor-captive roles (2c-f). In a word, just as the fall of Babylon was an interim fulfillment of one side of the Day of the Lord, so the return was a pale mini-reflection of the other – each and 'earnest' that the total threat/promise would yet be fulfilled."

The amazing feature of the first two verses of this chapter is again the time-factor. The Babylonian captivity was still one century away and the return of the first captives another 70 more years. The first intent of the Holy Spirit was to give those who would be led away a basis of hope that would make them understand that God had not abandoned them. The fact that God's compassion looks almost two centuries ahead reveals both the intensity of God's emotions as well as the eternal aspect. We see the same principle demonstrated in Jeremiah's prophecy. We read: "This is what the LORD says: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.' "3 Centuries later, Matthew would quote Jeremiah's prophecy in connection with King Herod's massacre of the infants in Bethlehem.<sup>4</sup> God's Spirit lamented the murders approximately 500 years before they were committed.

The gist of these verses confirms God's original intent with His people that they would be "a kingdom of priests," as He had said to Israel at Mount Sinai: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."<sup>5</sup> That is the purpose for which God had chosen them. This choice was reconfirmed as a repetition of marriage vows. God's election here has the salvation of the

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1. See Jer. 49:18; 50:40.
  2. Gen. 2:10-14
  3. Jer. 31:15
  4. See Matt. 2:16,17.
  5. Ex. 19:5,6

whole world in view. This is confirmed by the attitude of the “aliens” and “nations.” Israel’s experience during and after the captivity only partially fulfilled God’s dream. This dream will be realized when “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”<sup>1</sup>

*Barnes’ Notes* states about the words “Aliens will join them and unite with the house of Jacob”: “The ‘stranger,’ here, probably refers to those foreigners who would become proselytes to their religion, while they were in Babylon. Those proselytes would be firmly united with them, and would return with them to their own land. Their captivity would be attended with this advantage, that many even of those who led them away, would be brought to embrace their religion, and to return with them to their own country. If it is asked what ‘evidence’ there is that any considerable number of the people of Chaldea became Jewish proselytes, I answer, that it is expressly stated in Est 8:17: ‘And many of the people of the land became Jews, for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.’ Ezra, indeed, has not mentioned the fact, that many of the people of Babylonia became proselytes to the religion of the Jews, but it is in accordance with all that we know of their history, and their influence on the nations with which, from time to time, they were connected, that many should have been thus joined to them. We know that in subsequent times many of other nations became proselytes, and that multitudes of the Egyptians, the Macedonians, the Romans, and the inhabitants of Asia Minor, embraced the Jewish religion, or became what were called ‘proselytes of the gate.’ They were circumcised, and were regarded as entitled to a part of the privileges of the Jewish people (see Acts 2:9-11; compare Acts 17:4,17). Tacitus, speaking of his time, says, that every abandoned man, despising the religion of his country, bears tribute and revenue to Jerusalem, whence it happens that the number of the Jews is greatly increased.’ ... That the Jews, therefore, who were in Babylon should induce many of the Chaldeans during their long captivity to become proselytes, is in accordance with all their history.”

Vv.3-23 contain, in the words of *The New International Version*, a “taunt against the king of Babylon.” The Hebrew word is *mashal*, which is rendered elsewhere “oracle,” or “proverb.” We find it used for the first time in the verse: “Then Balaam uttered his *oracle*: ‘Balak brought me from Aram, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains. ‘ ‘Come,’ ‘ he said, ‘curse Jacob for me; come, denounce Israel.’ ”<sup>2</sup> Also in: “The *proverbs* of Solomon son of David, king of Israel.”<sup>3</sup> J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes about this translation: “*Taunt*: the notion of ‘jeering’ is not suitable to the song or to the word used here; *māḏāl* is a proverb or parable, a saying or way of putting something so that its inner meaning comes to light. This is the intention here: to express the inner realities involved in the fall of Babylon’s king.” Motyer continues: “There is no point asking which king of Babylon Isaiah has in mind. If it had been essential to know, he would have told us.”

As Babylon acquires a symbolic meaning in Scripture, so the fall of its king has been interpreted symbolically as pertaining to the fall of him who is the author of all rebellion against the rule and supremacy of God. The words “O morning star, son of the dawn” (v.12) seem to point to someone beyond the human being who is lamented here. *The New King James Version* renders the verse: “O Lucifer, son of the morning!”

*Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* explains that Lucifer is: “the Latin name for the planet Venus. The word Lucifer appears only once in the Bible (Isa 14:12). Literally, the passage describes the overthrow of a tyrant, the king of Babylon. But many Bible scholars see in this passage a description of Satan, who rebelled against the throne of God and was ‘brought down to Sheol, to the lowest depths of the Pit’ (Isa 14:15). The same kind of interpretation is often given to Ezek 28:11-19. The description of the king of Tyre thus is believed to reach beyond that of an earthly ruler to the archangel who was cast out of heaven for leading a revolt against God.” *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary* adds: “As a symbolical representation of the king of Babylon in his pride, splendor, and fall, the passage goes beyond the Babylonian prince and invests Satan, who, at the head of this present world-system is the real though invisible power behind the

1. Isa. 11:9
2. Num. 23:7
3. Prov. 1:1

successive world rulers of Tyre, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. This far-reaching passage goes beyond human history and marks the beginning of sin in the universe and the fall of Satan and the pristine, sinless spheres before the creation of man. Similarly Ezekiel (Ezek 28:12-14), under the figure of the king of Tyre, likewise traces the fall of Satan and the corruption of his power and glory. In the Ezekiel passage Satan's glorious and splendid unfallen state is described. In Isa 14:12-14 his fall is depicted. In both passages representation is not of Satan as confined to his own person but working in and consummating his plans through earthly kings and rulers who take to themselves divine honors and who, whether they actually know this or not, rule in the spirit and under the aims of Satan. Dan 10:13 and Eph 6:12 show that there are human as well as superhuman agencies in world governments in the satanic world system."

V.9 contains several words that deserve a closer look. "The grave" is the rendering of the Hebrew word *Sheol* about which *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "The Hebrew *Sheol* corresponded nearly to the Greek *Hades*, and the Latin *Inferi*. It was a dismal region in the center of the earth, whither departed souls descended, and where they remained thenceforth. There were various depths in it, each apparently more dismal than the preceding; but there is no evidence that it was considered to contain any place of happiness, until after the return from the Captivity. The prophet here represents *Sheol* as disturbed by the advent of the Babylonian monarch, and as rousing itself to receive him. The great ones of the earth, and the kings, who are kings even in Hades, and sit upon thrones, are especially moved by the occasion, and prepare to meet and greet their brother. Personal identity and continued consciousness of it after death are assumed; and the former earthly rank of the inmates seems to be recognized and maintained."

"The spirits of the departed" is the translation of the single Hebrew word *rapha'*, which some Bible scholars render "shadowy ones." "All those who were leaders" is the rendering of another single Hebrew word *'attuwd*, which literally means "he-goats." As Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "The word is ironical: 'shadowy, flabby he-goats!'"

We may think that Isaiah mixes his metaphors in these verses. If "the grave," *sheol*, is the underworld, the place where the departed spirits can consciously welcome newcomers, how can it also be the place where the body is decomposing, as is evident from the words "maggots are spread out beneath you and worms cover you?" Jesus spoke of "hell" as the place "where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"<sup>1</sup> The words are a quotation from the last verse in *The Book of Isaiah*: "And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."<sup>2</sup> The word Jesus used, which is translated "hell" is *geena* or *gehenna*, which denoted a valley outside Jerusalem where the garbage of the city was dumped. The idea seems to be that some people will end up on God's garbage heap because the image of their Creator is decomposed in them.

We must bear in mind that Isaiah's words here are put in the form of a poem, taunting or lamenting. This is a song, not a report. What we conclude beyond doubt is that the prophet and his contemporaries did not consider death to be the end of conscious life. "The worm" in Jesus' words was the maggot that gnaws at the human soul, not at his body. It is symbolic of inner corruption. The suffering of the soul beyond death, evidently consists partly in the consideration of what was and could have been.

Although the initial application of this poem may have been the king of Babylon, the language used in vv. 12-15 to describe his ambitions goes well beyond anything that could apply to any human being. No human every fell from heaven to earth. And even the most power-hungry monarch would not think of placing his throne above the stars. Their ambitions were earthbound. As far as ascending to heaven is concerned, the thought of a God who dwelt in heaven does not seem to have entered into most of the royal minds. But the description of these ambitions fits Satan to a T. Ezekiel, using the same method of prophecy regarding the king of Tyre, describes Satan's aspirations with: "Your heart became proud on account of your

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1. Mark 9:48

2. Isa. 66:24

beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet, Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, prefers to see in these verses a reference to a Canaanite myth. We read: “*Morning star (hêlçl, 12)* alludes to the Canaanite myth of Helal/Ishtar who attempted a heavenly coup that failed. The Old Testament uses allusions like this without attributing reality to the characters concerned.” This scholar seems to overlook the possibility that pagan myths could be derived from Biblical truths instead of the other way around. Pagan mythology is satiated with creation myths, but that does not invalidate the revelatory truths of the first two chapters of Genesis.

It is true that Isaiah poem seems to sway back and forth between a human being and a spirit. “Is this the man who shook the earth” seems more applicable to a cruel human dictator than to a fallen angel. We could see the shadow of the Antichrist in v.16. But it is also difficult to assert where human ambition ends and Satan’s involvement begins. Ezekiel touches upon this in his prophecy about the ruler of Tyre. We read: “In the pride of your heart you say, ‘I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas.’ But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god.”<sup>2</sup> The fact that we are looking a prophecy, given in poetical form, makes the lines of separation between that which is human and demonic move back and forth.

The gist of vv.18-20a seems to be that Babylon’s king is denied a state funeral, making him less honorable than the other world rulers. It is difficult to apply this statement to Satan who, being a spirit, has no body that could be interred. Symbolically, however, it can be taken as an addition of ignominy of being thrown on the garbage dump instead of being given a state funeral. That is certainly expressed in Jesus’ remarks about those who end up in “gehenna,”<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem’s dunghill. People who perished in Nazi concentration camps would have drawn comfort from Isaiah’s prophecy if they had known that the one who had orchestrated their “final solution” would meet such a fate. When Hitler committed suicide, the Russian Army found his charred body outside the Berlin chancellery.

Considering again the time-factor of this prophecy, we can see how this “taunt” is part of God’s victory over evil. At the moment we suffer Satan’s barrages it is difficult to keep in mind that he is a vanquished foe and that he will be thrown into the lake of fire at the end of time.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this is the force of this prophecy. It helps those who go through suffering to look at their experiences in the light of eternity and realize that, in the words of the Apostle Paul, “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”<sup>5</sup> Paul expresses the same thought in his Epistle to the Thessalonians, making the even stronger point that believers in Jesus Christ will play an important role in this retribution. We read: “All this is evidence that God’s judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.”<sup>6</sup> Reading this chapter to Satan and his demons when they attack us will have the same effect upon them as using the Name of Jesus. As a matter of fact, it is because of what that Name stands for that this prophecy will become a reality.

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1. Ezek. 28:17
  2. Ezek. 28:2
  3. See Mark 9:48.
  4. Rev. 20:10
  5. Rom. 8:18
  6. II Thess. 1:5-10

In these verses it is no longer the inhabitants of Sheol who are speaking but God Himself. In order to understand the importance of the message, we must remember that the Israelites thought of eternal life in terms of life that was transmitted from father to son as a continuation of the family name. The law that regulated the inheritance of the tribal and family allotments in Canaan expressed this philosophy. This does not mean that the Jews did not believe in life after death, but in the same way as they spoke of blessing in terms of material well-being, so they thought of eternal life as a continuation of the family name on earth. "The offspring of the wicked will never be mentioned again" is the equivalent of "the second death."

Whether taken literally or symbolically, we understand that the lesson of vv.20b-23 is that evil will no longer rule this world. The words "inherit the land" are important since they are used in connection with Israel's entering into God's Promised Land. David wrote psalms on this theme in which he stated that the children of those who fear the Lord would "inherit the land."<sup>1</sup> Jesus put this in a wider context in *The Sermon on the Mount*, saying: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."<sup>2</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: "This brilliant, surging poem is a horrific description of devastation, carnage, disappointed hopes, dead sons, a shattered environment. The wages of sin is death."

The Babylon about which King Nebuchadnezzar said: "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"<sup>3</sup> would be swept away like dust by God's broom of destruction. Nebuchadnezzar's pride would be turned into wasteland. From John's description of Babylon in Revelation we understand that more is involved than the fall of one particular empire. This is judgment upon "the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth."<sup>4</sup>

In vv.24-27 this prophecy takes a step back in time. Assyria was the present threat in Isaiah's day. That was the source of King Ahaz' panic. The judgment upon Babylon had little meaning for this king since Babylon had barely made its presence known yet at that time. This chronological reversal teaches us that God's eschatology has bearing upon the present. What God will do to Satan in the days to come determines what happens to us today. This principle constitutes an incentive of faith and victory. Not only will there be final victory, there is present victory also.

- ii. Philistia: the Lord's sure promises to David (14:28-32)

**28 This oracle came in the year King Ahaz died:**

**29 Do not rejoice, all you Philistines, that the rod that struck you is broken; from the root of that snake will spring up a viper, its fruit will be a darting, venomous serpent.**

**30 The poorest of the poor will find pasture, and the needy will lie down in safety. But your root I will destroy by famine; it will slay your survivors.**

**31 Wail, O gate! Howl, O city! Melt away, all you Philistines! A cloud of smoke comes from the north, and there is not a straggler in its ranks.**

**32 What answer shall be given to the envoys of that nation? "The LORD has established Zion, and in her his afflicted people will find refuge."**

Introducing this section in *Isaiah*, J. Alec Motyer writes: "For the second time (see 6:1), Isaiah dates an oracle by a death. Ahaz was a significant king to Isaiah for, as we have seen, the prophet understood Ahaz' refusal to walk by faith and his commitment to political salvation by an alliance with Assyria ... as being the death knell of the dynasty of David. Would that happen with his death? Throughout the Assyrian period Philistia was a ceaseless agitator for rebellion. In 734 BC Gath refused tribute and was sacked; in 720 Philistia connived with Egypt to rebel, and Sargon II defeated Egypt at Gath and took Askelon and Gaza; in

1. See Ps. 25:13; 37:9,11,22,29,34.
2. Matt. 5:5
3. Dan. 4:30
4. Rev. ch.17,18

711 Ashdod was somehow central to an unsuccessful west Palestinian revolt; in 705 Ashkelon rebelled and fell to Sennacherib in his campaign of 701. The death of Ahaz in 715 could well have been the occasion of a Philistine approach to Hezekiah with a view to joint anti-Assyrian action. At any rate such an embassy, maybe under cover of a mission of condolence on the death of his father, is a scenario which fits this oracle like a glove. We can start by asking what question would prompt the answer proposed in verse 32 with emphasis ‘It is the LORD who has founded Zion and it is in it that his downtrodden people will find refuge.’ Was another foundation – an alliance with Philistia and Egypt – being proposed? Another refuge for a small, beleaguered people? To Isaiah all this was pernicious. The times might well be menacing and the prospect of recovering independent sovereignty enticing, but all the security Zion and its people needed was in the Lord. Typically of Isaiah this oracle is a balanced statement.”

*The Pulpit Commentary*, in introducing this section, observes: “The Philistines had suffered grievously at the hands of Judah in the reign of Uzziah (...2 Chronicles 26:6), and had retaliated in the reign of Ahaz (...2 Chronicles 28:18). It would seem that after this they were invaded by Tiglath-Pileser, who penetrated as far as Gaza, which he took ... and made tributary, as he also did Ascalon ... Tiglath-Pileser died shortly before Ahaz, and the present ‘burden’ seems to have been uttered in connection with his death. Isaiah warns Philistia ... that her rejoicing is premature; Tiglath-Pileser will have successors as powerful and as cruel as himself, and these successors will carry destruction and ravage over the whole land.”

As we shall see, Philistia is the first of Israel’s immediate neighbors addressed in the next seven chapters. Moab will be next, followed by Damascus (Syria), Ephraim (Israel’s northern kingdom) and Egypt.

The mystery in vv.29 and 30 is not easy to unravel. The rod that struck Philistia is probably the dynasty of David, whose representative, Ahaz, just died. Ahaz had never booked any victories in a war against the Philistines, but David surely had. Actually, they had been the ones to harass Judah during the reign of Ahaz. As *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “It was not true that they had been smitten during the reign of Ahaz, but it had been done by his predecessor Uzziah. Perhaps the prophet refers to that prince, and to his death. He had smitten and subdued them. At his death they would rejoice; and their joy had been continued during the reigns of Jotham and Ahaz. They would now rejoice the more that a young and inexperienced prince was to ascend the throne. Their joy had been that ‘Uzziah’ had died, and that joy had been augmenting since his death. But the prophet now tells them that they will have no further occasion for such joy.”

The broken rod of David’s dynasty reminds us of “the stump of Jesse.”<sup>1</sup> J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, explains: “David was *the rod that struck you*, for no other king of Judah was so completely victorious over Philistia ... But with Ahaz *the rod ... is broken*, for up to that time the sovereign independence of David’s house had remained intact but from Ahaz onwards the Davidic king was a vassal until the dynasty disappeared altogether.”

The change from rod to snake seems to bend the laws of imagination unless we see it as a reference to Moses’ experience when God called him to go to Egypt to lead Israel out of slavery. We read that Moses asked God: “ ‘What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, ‘ ‘The LORD did not appear to you?’? Then the LORD said to him, ‘What is that in your hand?’ ‘A staff,’ he replied. The LORD said, ‘Throw it on the ground.’ Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake, and he ran from it. Then the LORD said to him, ‘Reach out your hand and take it by the tail.’ So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand. ‘This,’ said the LORD, ‘is so that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers — the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob — has appeared to you.’ ”<sup>2</sup> We usually see the snake as a symbol of evil, not as a mode of God’s revelation of Himself. The incident that may shed light upon this fact took place when Moses and Aaron appeared before Pharaoh. We read: “Aaron threw his staff down in front of Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake. Pharaoh then

1. See Isa. 11:1

2. Ex. 4:1-5

summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Yet Pharaoh's heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said."<sup>1</sup> Isaiah's allusion to the exodus must have been more for Israel's benefit than for the Philistines.

"The poorest of the poor" is the rendering of the Hebrew idiom "the firstborn of the poor." Most Bible scholars believe that this refers to the poor Israelites who remained behind when the rest of the population was taken away in captivity. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: "It is unclear what the expression means. There may be a clue in seeing 'firstborn' as an exodus motif (Ex. 4:22). In Egypt Israel seemed doomed and helpless but, as the Lord's 'firstborn,' proved triumphant ... In Egypt, resourceless and defenseless though they were, they became victorious. Maybe the expression here could be translated, 'the firstborn, poor though they be.'" The main point is obviously that Philistia will be wiped out as a nation.

The Assyrian invasion is depicted here as a cloud of smoke that devours the land as a wildfire. Jeremiah saw a similar picture about the coming of the Babylonians who would invade Judah and carry its inhabitants into captivity. We read: "The word of the LORD came to me again: 'What do you see?' 'I see a boiling pot, tilting away from the north,' I answered. The LORD said to me, 'From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land. I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms,' declares the LORD."<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to determine the relationship between v.32 and the preceding verses. Most logical is to take "that nation" to be Philistia, the subject of v.31. But in order to maintain such a link there must have been an effort by the Philistines to enter into a covenant with Judah, which would contradict Philistia's joy over the death of Ahaz. According to *Barnes' Notes*, "*The Septuagint* renders this, 'And what shall the kings of the Gentiles then answer? That the Lord hath founded Zion.'" The commentary continues: "The scope of the passage is the assurance that Zion would be safe, being founded and preserved by Yahweh; and that the Philistines had no cause of triumph at the death of Ahaz, since God would still be the protector of his people. The doctrine established by this passage is, that in all the changes which take place by the death of kings, princes, magistrates, and ministers; and in all the revolutions which occur in kingdoms, the enemies of the people of God have no cause for rejoicing. God is the protector of his church; and he will show that he has founded Zion, and that his people are safe. No weapon that is formed against his people shall prosper, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against his church."

iii. Moab: salvation refused by pride (15:1–16:14)

***1 An oracle concerning Moab: Ar in Moab is ruined, destroyed in a night! Kir in Moab is ruined, destroyed in a night!***

***2 Dibon goes up to its temple, to its high places to weep; Moab wails over Nebo and Medeba. Every head is shaved and every beard cut off.***

***3 In the streets they wear sackcloth; on the roofs and in the public squares they all wail, prostrate with weeping.***

***4 Heshbon and Elealeh cry out, their voices are heard all the way to Jahaz. Therefore the armed men of Moab cry out, and their hearts are faint.***

***5 My heart cries out over Moab; her fugitives flee as far as Zoar, as far as Eglath Shelishiyah. They go up the way to Luhith, weeping as they go; on the road to Horonaim they lament their destruction.***

***6 The waters of Nimrim are dried up and the grass is withered; the vegetation is gone and nothing green is left.***

***7 So the wealth they have acquired and stored up they carry away over the Ravine of the Poplars.***

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1. Ex. 7:10-13

2. Jer. 1:13-15

*8 Their outcry echoes along the border of Moab; their wailing reaches as far as Eglaim, their lamentation as far as Beer Elim.*

*9 Dimon's waters are full of blood, but I will bring still more upon Dimon — a lion upon the fugitives of Moab and upon those who remain in the land.*

*Chapter 16:1 Send lambs as tribute to the ruler of the land, from Sela, across the desert, to the mount of the Daughter of Zion.*

*2 Like fluttering birds pushed from the nest, so are the women of Moab at the fords of the Arnon.*

*3 "Give us counsel, render a decision. Make your shadow like night — at high noon. Hide the fugitives, do not betray the refugees.*

*4 Let the Moabite fugitives stay with you; be their shelter from the destroyer." The oppressor will come to an end, and destruction will cease; the aggressor will vanish from the land.*

*5 In love a throne will be established; in faithfulness a man will sit on it — one from the house of David — one who in judging seeks justice and speeds the cause of righteousness.*

*6 We have heard of Moab's pride — her overweening pride and conceit, her pride and her insolence — but her boasts are empty.*

*7 Therefore the Moabites wail, they wail together for Moab. Lament and grieve for the men of Kir Hareseth.*

*8 The fields of Heshbon wither, the vines of Sibmah also. The rulers of the nations have trampled down the choicest vines, which once reached Jazer and spread toward the desert. Their shoots spread out and went as far as the sea.*

*9 So I weep, as Jazer weeps, for the vines of Sibmah. O Heshbon, O Elealeh, I drench you with tears! The shouts of joy over your ripened fruit and over your harvests have been stilled.*

*10 Joy and gladness are taken away from the orchards; no one sings or shouts in the vineyards; no one treads out wine at the presses, for I have put an end to the shouting.*

*11 My heart laments for Moab like a harp, my inmost being for Kir Hareseth.*

*12 When Moab appears at her high place, she only wears herself out; when she goes to her shrine to pray, it is to no avail.*

*13 This is the word the LORD has already spoken concerning Moab.*

*14 But now the LORD says: "Within three years, as a servant bound by contract would count them, Moab's splendor and all her many people will be despised, and her survivors will be very few and feeble."*

In introducing this section, Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "The Babylonian oracle (13:1 – 14:23) focused on the centrality of the people of God (14:1–2) in his executive control of world history; the Philistia oracle (14:28–32) confirmed this by affirming the Davidic promises and the certainty that the Lord would honor them. The Moab oracle follows in sequence, by correcting any impression that the promises are exclusivist: the promises which will be fulfilled in Zion embrace all who take refuge – even Moab!"

Isaiah's prophetic and panoramic view sweeps from west to east. Whereas the Philistines were not related at all to Israel (they were part of Canaan even when Abraham first arrived there) Moab was a distant relative. The Moabites were the offspring of Lot, Abraham's nephew. The law forbade the inclusion of Moabites into the people of Israel after King Balak engaged the prophet Balaam to curse Israel as it approached the Promised Land. When that ploy failed, Moab succeeded in incurring considerable spiritual and physical damage to Israel by following Balaam's advice to invite the men of Israel to participate in the rites of Baal Peor, which involved immoral sexual acts.<sup>1</sup> The story of Ruth indicates that God makes exceptions for those who love and follow Him.

The Moabites distinguished themselves by their extreme arrogance. In a following chapter, Isaiah would say about them: "We have heard of Moab's pride — her overweening pride and conceit, her pride and her insolence — but her boasts are empty. Therefore the Moabites wail, they wail together for Moab.

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1. See Num. 23,24; 31:8,16; Deut. 23:3,4.

Lament and grieve for the men of Kir Hareseth.” Yet it would take another century before Moab would begin to feel the knell of Babylon’s oppression and even then they escaped Judah’s fate of being led away in captivity. *The Fausset’s Bible Dictionary* explains: “Moab sent messengers to Jerusalem to Zedekiah ... to consult as to shaking off Nebuchadnezzar’s yoke (Jer 27:1-8,10-11). By submission to Nebuchadnezzar’s yoke, according to Jeremiah’s counsel, Moab though chastised was not carried captive as Judah. But for her usurpation of Israel’s land, and for saying ‘Judah is like unto all the pagan,’ i.e. fares no better for having Jehovah for her God than the pagan who have idols, God ‘would open her side from the cities on her frontiers, the glory of the country (a glorious country in richness of soil), Bethjeshimoth, Baalmeon, and Kiriathaim, unto the men of the East,’ i.e. to the marauding Bedouin (Ezek 25:8-11).”

Isaiah’s prophecy about Moab’s destruction pinpoints multiple locations, moving roughly from south to north. The first four verses do not detail the destruction, just the devastating effect it has upon the population as a whole. A general lament covers the country, bringing people to their idol temple to weep and bringing the army to tears. There is a general day of mourning in which people wail, shave their heads and clothe themselves in sackcloth. The grief described is overwhelming, but the actual cause is never mentioned. But this is not the “godly sorrow” the Apostle Paul mentions in his epistle to the Corinthians. We read: “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the affliction the people of Moab did not cry at the right place and to the right Person. They poured out their tears before their idols, not before the Lord. That is what caused the Lord’s grief over Moab. Some Bible scholars believe that it is Isaiah who does the grieving. But if he does, it is because of the sentiments God shares with His prophet. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, writes above these verses: “*The Lord’s grief over Moab.*” He states: “*My heart* (5) leads on to *I will bring* (9), identifying the speaker as the Lord grieving over the fugitives (5), the environment (6), the pathetic efforts to salvage something from the disaster (7–8) and the further suffering ahead (9). This is all joined together in Hebrew by the explanatory word ‘for’ seven times: before *they go* and *on the road* in verse 5; before *the waters* and instead of *and* (*the grass*) in 6; also at the beginning of 8 and 9, and instead of *but* in 9. In this way the verses are a long catalogue of what agonizes the Lord, who weeps even as he smites. Just as this Moab oracle corrects a possible misapprehension in the Philistia oracle (14:28ff.) by showing that the Davidic promises embrace the Gentiles, so it adjusts the Babylon oracle (13:1ff.). There the divine nature expressed itself in holy wrath; but there is another side to the Lord, a heart of astonishing sympathy and empathy, compassion and identification with human suffering.” Ultimately, this tension between love and righteousness is expressed to the full in Jesus’ death on the cross, where God wept hot tears over human sin. Jeremiah devotes considerable space to a prophecy over Moab,<sup>2</sup> which ends with the promise: “ ‘Yet I will restore the fortunes of Moab in days to come,’ declares the LORD.”<sup>3</sup>

The towns mentioned in this section indicate the southern direction in which the fugitives fled the approaching army. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on this: “One of the most pathetic sights of war is the plight of civilians caught up in a disaster not of their making, and left to salvage what they can from the misfortune. Imperial glory comes at the expense of those at the bottom, not those at the top.” We have seen the pictures of this kind of scene all through world history whenever wars are fought.

On the opening verses of chapter 16, Motyer comments: “The scene changes. Isaiah writes as though overhearing Moab’s ‘Cabinet’ discussing what to do. They are meeting at Sela in the far south whither, presumably, the government has fled and now pleads for help. In panting, breathless Hebrew the prophet reflects their panic.” The mention of lambs sent to Zion as a tribute may be a reference to Moab’s previous condition of being controlled by Israel during the reign of King Ahab. We read: “Now Mesha king of Moab raised sheep, and he had to supply the king of Israel with a hundred thousand lambs and with the

1. II Cor. 7:10
2. See Jer. 48.
3. Jer. 48:47

wool of a hundred thousand rams. But after Ahab died, the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel.”<sup>1</sup>

Bible scholars, however, do not agree upon the definite meaning of these verses. The Hebrew word for “lamb” is *kar*, which some read as *bar*, “son.” Some believe that it means that the prince of Moab has to flee to Judah to save his life. According to *Barnes’ Notes*, “*The Septuagint* reads this: ‘I will send reptiles *herpeta* upon the land. Is not the mountain of the daughter of Zion a desolate rock?’ The Chaldee renders it, ‘Bear ye tribute to the Messiah, the anointed of Israel, who is powerful over you who were in the desert, to Mount Zion.’ And this, understanding by the Messiah the anointed king of Israel, is probably the true rendering.”

About “Sela” *Barnes’ Notes* comments: “The word ‘Sela’ *Cela*’ means ‘a rock;’ and by it here there can be no doubt that there is intended the city of that name which was the capital of ‘Arabia Petrea.’ The city was situated within the bounds of Arabia or Idumea, but was probably at this time in the possession of the Moabites. It was, therefore, the remotest part of their territory, and the sense may be, ‘Send tribute even from the remotest part of your land;’ or it may be, that the region around that city was particularly favorable to pasturage, and for keeping flocks. To this place they had fled with their flocks on the invasion from the north.”

Isaiah depicts the confusion of the fleeing population, particularly women, probably with their children, as birds that are chased from their nest. He may have had in mind Solomon’s proverb: “Like a bird that strays from its nest is a man who strays from his home.”<sup>2</sup>

These verses suggest at the same time that Moab could be saved if they would seek the Lord. As *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “From their asylum in Edom they are bidden to make submission to the people of God, for Jehovah is their only sure refuge. His throne shall some day be established at David’s capital of Jerusalem (a prediction of the second coming of Christ).”

V.3 is obviously addressed to Judah, advising them to take in the Moabite refugees. Some Bible scholars, however, believe that Moab is addressed. *The Pulpit Commentary*, for instance, believes that “an offer of mercy is made to Moab on certain conditions, viz. that she return to her allegiance to the house of David, and show kindness to fugitive Israelites.” The text strongly suggests that it is the other way around and that Moab is advised to put itself under the protection of the God of Israel, as Ruth, one of the most famous of the Moabites, did when she accompanied Naomi to Bethlehem and said: “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”<sup>3</sup> But most Bible scholars agree that the text is a difficult one because the Hebrew grammar allows for different interpretations. Yet, it is difficult not to see in vv.4b and 5 a prophecy about the coming of Christ and the establishment of His millennial reign.

Whatever offer of salvation was presented to Moab, it was turned down, because it was too simple to be acceptable. Salvation by grace is too cheap for our human pride. As Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, explains: “The return of Moab to tears implies that the terms on which security could be found in Zion were not acceptable – and the reason given is Moab’s *pride, conceit and insolence*. Had they been asked for a higher tribute price, their pride would have been intact, but the simple price of submitting to Zion’s king was too high.”

One problem in v.7 is the Hebrew word *‘ashiysh*. *The King James Version* renders it “foundation.” *The New Living Translation* reads: “Yes, you people of Moab, mourn for *the delicacies* of Kir-hareseth.” *The New International Version*: “Lament and grieve for *the men* of Kir Hareseth.” But a footnote states: “Or ‘raisin cakes,’ a wordplay.” *The Pulpit Commentary* prefers this “delicacy” reading: “The word here translated ‘foundations’ is elsewhere always rendered ‘flagons’ or ‘flagons of wine’ (...2 Samuel 6:19; ... Song of Solomon 2:5; ... Hosea 3:1). And this rendering is more agreeable to the context than ‘foundations,’

1. II Kings 3:4,5
2. Prov. 27:8
3. Ruth 1:16

since it is the loss of the products of the soil which is threatened in the next three verses.” In a parallel text in Jeremiah, we read: “Therefore I wail over Moab, for all Moab I cry out, I moan for the men of Kir Hareseth.”<sup>1</sup> But Jeremiah uses the Hebrew word *‘ansheey* for “the men.” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* puts the problem on account of a copying mistake, stating: “A palpable mistake in this place is happily corrected by the parallel text of Jer 48:31, where, instead of *‘ashiysheey*, foundations or flagons, we read *‘ansheey*, men.”

It is true that the subject of the following verses is the sad condition of the fields and vineyards the devastation of which results in the disappearance of what gives joy to daily life. The vines, the shoots of which “spread out and went as far as the sea,” may represent more than physical plants; they probably symbolize the influence of Moab’s political power in the area. Isaiah’s multi-dimensional poetry covers several themes at the same time. Being overrun by the Assyrians not only curtails Moab’s political influence but also the joy of everyday living. In the section in Jeremiah, previously mentioned, the prophet follows that same lament. We read: “I weep for you, as Jazer weeps, O vines of Sibmah. Your branches spread as far as the sea; they reached as far as the sea of Jazer. The destroyer has fallen on your ripened fruit and grapes. Joy and gladness are gone from the orchards and fields of Moab. I have stopped the flow of wine from the presses; no one treads them with shouts of joy. Although there are shouts, they are not shouts of joy.”<sup>2</sup>

Here also we find the amazing revelation that as God inflicts this punishment, He, at the same time, identifies with the suffering of those who receive the punishment. “So I weep, as Jazer weeps,” (v.9) and “My heart laments for Moab like a harp” (v.11) indicate the way God experiences the consequences of His own justices upon human sin. All this is, of course, a prelude to Jesus’ suffering on the cross, in which God took upon Himself the result of our revolt against Him. The deepest reason for the Lord’s grief about Moab is that, instead of turning to Him for salvation, the people of Moab try to find relief at the wrong source. The “high places” where Moab goes to pray are not the sights of deliverance from suffering, they are the cause.

Regarding the “three years” mentioned in the concluding verses of this chapter, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “What is predicted and fulfilled within three years gives ground for confident faith in the remoter and greater promises of God. Probably this prediction was elicited by a Moabite enquiry (cf. 21:11–12). The prophets were sought out by Gentile enquirers (e.g. 2 Ki. 8:7ff.). The Assyrian crisis provoked intense diplomatic activity between the Palestinian states. If Isaiah published 15:1 – 16:12 to coincide with a Moabite embassy, seeking to press on them his sense of their critical plight and the solution he had to offer, one or more Moabites could well have come to him for clarification. On the other hand, the prophets used the technique of addressing absent audiences (Moab) in order to teach present hearers (Judah), here enforcing the lessons of forsaking pride and restoring to faith. In this case the time-factor not only provides an interim fulfillment and therefore ground for faith but also a proper stress on the urgency to respond.”

- iv. Damascus/Ephraim: the way of death and the promise of life (17:1–18:7)

***1 An oracle concerning Damascus: "See, Damascus will no longer be a city but will become a heap of ruins.***

***2 The cities of Aroer will be deserted and left to flocks, which will lie down, with no one to make them afraid.***

***3 The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim, and royal power from Damascus; the remnant of Aram will be like the glory of the Israelites," declares the LORD Almighty.***

***4 "In that day the glory of Jacob will fade; the fat of his body will waste away.***

***5 It will be as when a reaper gathers the standing grain and harvests the grain with his arm — as when a man glean heads of grain in the Valley of Rephaim.***

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1. Jer. 48:31

2. Jer. 48:32,33

*6 Yet some gleanings will remain, as when an olive tree is beaten, leaving two or three olives on the topmost branches, four or five on the fruitful boughs," declares the LORD, the God of Israel.*

*7 In that day men will look to their Maker and turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel.*

*8 They will not look to the altars, the work of their hands, and they will have no regard for the Asherah poles and the incense altars their fingers have made.*

*9 In that day their strong cities, which they left because of the Israelites, will be like places abandoned to thickets and undergrowth. And all will be desolation.*

*10 You have forgotten God your Savior; you have not remembered the Rock, your fortress. Therefore, though you set out the finest plants and plant imported vines,*

*11 though on the day you set them out, you make them grow, and on the morning when you plant them, you bring them to bud, yet the harvest will be as nothing in the day of disease and incurable pain.*

*12 Oh, the raging of many nations — they rage like the raging sea! Oh, the uproar of the peoples — they roar like the roaring of great waters!*

*13 Although the peoples roar like the roar of surging waters, when he rebukes them they flee far away, driven before the wind like chaff on the hills, like tumbleweed before a gale.*

*14 In the evening, sudden terror! Before the morning, they are gone! This is the portion of those who loot us, the lot of those who plunder us.*

*Chapter 18:1 Woe to the land of whirring wings along the rivers of Cush,*

*2 which sends envoys by sea in papyrus boats over the water. Go, swift messengers, to a people tall and smooth-skinned, to a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers.*

*3 All you people of the world, you who live on the earth, when a banner is raised on the mountains, you will see it, and when a trumpet sounds, you will hear it.*

*4 This is what the LORD says to me: "I will remain quiet and will look on from my dwelling place, like shimmering heat in the sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest."*

*5 For, before the harvest, when the blossom is gone and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he will cut off the shoots with pruning knives, and cut down and take away the spreading branches.*

*6 They will all be left to the mountain birds of prey and to the wild animals; the birds will feed on them all summer, the wild animals all winter.*

*7 At that time gifts will be brought to the LORD Almighty from a people tall and smooth-skinned, from a people feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers — the gifts will be brought to Mount Zion, the place of the Name of the LORD Almighty.*

Under the subscript "Damascus/Ephraim: the way of death and the promise of life," J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, gives the following insightful analysis of the background of this section: "In each of the three sets of oracles that make up this part of Isaiah, the Lord's people occupy the fourth position (cf. 22:1–25; 26:1–21), here the northern people, Ephraim (17:3, 4–6). But why does Isaiah conceal Ephraim behind an apparent address to Damascus, the capital city of the kingdom of Aram? This is precisely the point: the people of the Lord live out their histories within world history. They are part of the fivefold roll call of the nations which makes up the series. They are not immune from the demands, pressures, questions and temptations of life in this world. In Isaiah's time, they too were a small kingdom among the kingdoms and therefore faced the same problem: where is security to be found? Ephraim's answer, when up against the Assyrian threat, was to turn to Aram ... to sink its national identity in that of its more forceful erstwhile enemy, coming together in an Aram-Ephraim defensive alliance. Ephraim's hard experience taught that to identify with the world for salvation was to be caught up in the world's destruction. We must not be unrealistic about Ephraim's problem. Think of any small state in our own time threatened with absorption into a superpower! Collective security must have seemed an obvious, even wise way forward. But they could adopt it only at the expense of forgetting their saving God, their strong Rock (17:10). In the scheme of these oracles, the Lord has affirmed (14:1–2) that he sovereignly governs world history to make and keep his

people secure; he never revokes his promises (14:32); and the way of salvation for Gentiles is to submit to Zion and its king (16:4–5; cf. Ps. 2:10–12). But Ephraim is here found seeking security in Damascus, not in the Lord, failing to trust his promises and reversing his intended procedures by finding salvation in a Gentile power instead of opening a way of salvation to the Gentiles.”

About the first eleven verses of this chapter, Motyer observes: “The first half of the Damascus/Ephraim oracle, is a microcosm of history, how Damascus and Ephraim fare. They think they can be masters of their own destiny through collective security, but who is the real Ruler? Corresponding to this, 17:12 – 18:7 is a macrocosm of history, the worldwide scale of things. The same question is posed: who is the real Ruler?”

According to *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, “the Damascenes were the most extensive and flagrant of all idolaters. ‘There were in Damascus three hundred and sixty-five streets, in each of these was an idol, and each idol had his peculiar day of worship; so that the whole were worshipped in the course of the year.’ This, or anything like this, was a sufficient reason for this city’s destruction.”

We saw earlier that King Ahaz was afraid of the alliance Israel had made with Damascus. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states: “Already Tiglath-pileser had carried away the people of Damascus to Kir, in the fourth year of Ahaz (2 Kings 16:9); but now, in Hezekiah’s reign, a further overthrow is foretold (Jer 49:23; Zech 9:1). Also, Shalmaneser carried away Israel from Samaria to Assyria (2 Kings 17:6; 18:10-11), in the sixth year of Hezekiah of Judah (the ninth year of Hoshea of Israel). This prophecy was, doubtless, given previously in the first years of Hezekiah, when the foreign nations came into nearer collision with Judah, owing to the threatening aspect of Assyria.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “According to Vitranga, Damascus has been destroyed oftener than any other town; but it has a wonderful power of rising again from its ashes.”

In describing the results of God’s judgment, Isaiah makes his searchlight sway over Aram to Israel and back. Bible scholars disagree over the location of Aroer in v.2. Some believe it is the city in the tribal area of Gad, mentioned in Numbers<sup>1</sup>, others think that it must be another place with the same name in Aram. Since the fortified cities of Ephraim are mentioned in the next verse there seems to be no reason to seek the location of Aroer somewhere else outside Israel’s borders. Another problem is the mention of the glory of Israel. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, suggests that there may be irony in this. He states: “The glory Ephraim might have enjoyed is doomed and Damascus with it. But more likely the words are to be taken in their plain meaning: there is something imperishable in Ephraim, a glory that guarantees a future, but likewise there is a hope even for Aram. This unexpectedness of hope would be typically Isaianic and would, incidentally, form an inclusio with the Gentile hope expressed in 18:7.”

The prediction in the following verses of what will happen with Jacob’s glory does not shed much light on the question either. Jacob is portrayed as a sick man who is emaciated but still alive. Even after the harvest of God’s wrath has passed over it a remnant remains. The glory never disappears completely.

The recurring phrase that ties this prophecy together is “In that day...” We find it in vv.4, 7 and 9 with different content. V.4 – “In that day the glory of Jacob will fade,” v.7 – “In that day men will look to their Maker,” and v.9 – “In that day their strong cities, which they left because of the Israelites, will be like places abandoned to thickets and undergrowth.”

The harvest of grain and olives probably depicts Israel’s Assyrian captivity. The population of the northern kingdom was not taken away en masse. There were at least two instances in which part of the people were taken into captivity. This may be the meaning of Isaiah’s picture of the fat of Jacob’s body wasting away. It was not until Sargon captured Samaria in 722 BC that the evacuation was complete. We read in Second Kings: “The king of Assyria invaded the entire land, marched against Samaria and laid siege to it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the towns of the

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1. Num. 32:34

Medes.”<sup>1</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* explains about the various stages of this captivity: “We have seen already that Tiglath-pileser III deported the population of the northern tribes to Assyria and placed over the depopulated country governors of his own. And at a time considerably later, we learn that Sargon’s grandson Esarhaddon, and his great-grandson Ashurbanipal, ‘the great and noble Osnappar,’ imported to the region of Samaria settlers of nations conquered by them in the East (Ezra 4:2,10). Of the original settlers, whom a priest, carried away by the king of Assyria but brought back to Bethel, taught ‘the law of the god of the land,’ it is said that ‘they feared Yahweh, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away’ (2 Kings 17:33). The hybrid stock descended from those settlers is known to us in later history and in the Gospels as the Samaritans.” We read about this single returning priest in Second Kings, that he was sent back because the new settlers were suffering from attacking lions in the area. The record states: “Then the king of Assyria gave this order: Have one of the priests you took captive from Samaria go back to live there and teach the people what the god of the land requires. So one of the priests who had been exiled from Samaria came to live in Bethel and taught them how to worship the LORD.”<sup>2</sup> This would account, at least partly, for the remaining gleanings of grain and the few olives left in the top branches.

Some of the leftover fruit of the northern kingdom had moved to Jerusalem centuries earlier when Solomon’s kingdom split in two. When Jeroboam I disassociated himself from the temple in Jerusalem, we read: “Those from every tribe of Israel who set their hearts on seeking the LORD, the God of Israel, followed the Levites to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to the LORD, the God of their fathers. They strengthened the kingdom of Judah and supported Rehoboam son of Solomon three years, walking in the ways of David and Solomon during this time.”<sup>3</sup> Their offspring may have been the ones mentioned during the reign of Josiah, who initiated the restoration of Solomon’s temple. We read about them in Second Chronicles: “They went to Hilkiah the high priest and gave him the money that had been brought into the temple of God, which the Levites who were the doorkeepers had collected from the people of Manasseh, Ephraim and the entire remnant of Israel and from all the people of Judah and Benjamin and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”<sup>4</sup>

“In that day” in v.7 refers, first of all to the time of the Assyrian invasion and the captivity of the northern kingdom. “Men will look to their Maker” is a pregnant phrase with many implications. In the case of the Babylonian captivity of Judah, their deportation to Babylon meant the end of idolatry for the nation. After the return of the remnant to Jerusalem idol worship was never an issue again. Looking at the spiritual condition of the people when Jesus was born, we must conclude though that there had been no real progress in the recognition of God as their Creator. Legalism had replaced idol worship. Since there never was any return of Israel’s northern kingdom from Assyrian captivity, nothing can be said about the effect the captivity had upon them.

But the word “men” for the Hebrew *adam*, stands for mankind in general. Everyone who attacked Israel, who helped themselves to Israel’s riches and took advantage of the Promised Land and its inhabitants, faced a confrontation with the God of Israel. God revealed Himself to those who took His people into captivity. We know this to be true of the Babylonian captivity<sup>5</sup> and we may assume that Assyria did not fare differently.

The title “Maker” speaks of God as Creator of the human race. It stands in contrast to the idols that were the products of human hands. Idols are manmade, people are made by God. This recognition of the

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1. II Kings 17:5,6
  2. II Kings 17:27,28
  3. II Chron. 11:16,17
  4. II Chron. 34:9
  5. See Dan. 2:47; 3:28,29; 4:2,3,34,35,37.

God of Israel will be worldwide at the end of times at the return of Jesus Christ. The Apostle John states in Revelation: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.”<sup>1</sup>

V.9 – “In that day their strong cities, which they left because of the Israelites, will be like places abandoned to thickets and undergrowth. And all will be desolation,” has caused Bible scholars a good deal of trouble in trying to interpret the meaning. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states bluntly: “No one has ever yet been able to make any tolerable sense of these words. The translation of *The Septuagint* has happily preserved what seems to be the true reading of the text, as it stood in the copies of their time; though the words are now transposed, either in the text or in their Version; ... ‘the Amorites and the Hivites.’ ” *Barnes’ Notes* objects to Adam Clarke’s approach for the very reason that it “does violence to the Hebrew text!” That Commentary suggests: “The phrase may be rendered, ‘as the leavings or residue of a grove, copse, or entangled wood;’ and the idea is, that as a ‘few’ trees might be left when the axe man cuts down the grove, so a few inferior and smaller towns should be left in the desolation that would come upon Damascus.” *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests: “The reference is to the condition of the land when it passed out of the possession of the Canaanitish nations. It was then forsaken and desolate. So shall it be once more, when Israel is expelled for the same sins (... see 2 Kings 17:7, 8). **Which they left because of the children of Israel**; rather, *which men forsook before the children of Israel*; i.e. from which the Canaanites fled as the children of Israel advanced and took possession. The writer ignores the long and fierce struggle which the Canaanites made, and looks only to the result — retirement from a desolated country.”

Having presented Himself in the previous section as Creator, in vv.10 and 11 God addresses Israel, revealing Himself as her Savior. When they turned to idolatry, they forgot their Creator and as a result they never came to the place where they found Him as their Savior. Salvation always begins with a recognition of God as Creator. This is one of the lessons of *The Book of Job* where God answers Job in his suffering by revealing Himself as the Creator. This led ultimately to Job’s salvation. The Apostle Paul follows this line of thinking in Romans where he writes: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”<sup>2</sup>

Commenting on vv.9-11, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “Verses 9–11 contain the explanation of the downfall. This is a perfect example of the reasoned ministry the prophets offered. They were not demagogues winning arguments by shouting loudest; they offered description (9), diagnosis (10ab) and prognosis (10b–11). Faith is ever the real test of the Lord’s people: is it to be (lit.) ‘the cities of their stronghold’ (9) or ‘the Rock of your stronghold’ (10)? The Hebrew, taken in order, reads ‘their strong cities will be like the forsaken thing of forest and height which they left because of the sons of Israel.’ Doubtless the ruins of the long-deserted, overgrown fortresses of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan were still visible. In Joshua’s time, trusting the Lord proved stronger than ‘cities ... with walls up to the sky’ (Dt. 1:28), but when faith lapsed the people themselves built strongholds and trusted what they had once seen their God destroy.”

The tragedy emphasized in these verses is obviously that what Israel did to the original inhabitants of Canaan when they entered the Promised Land, now happened to them because the measure of their own iniquity was full to the brim.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Rev. 1:7

2. Rom. 1:18-23

Isaiah's comparison of the political situation of his time with a stormy sea fits the recurring theme of the Bible of man's revolt against God. The Psalmist sang: "The seas have lifted up, O LORD, the seas have lifted up their voice; the seas have lifted up their pounding waves. Mightier than the thunder of the great waters, mightier than the breakers of the sea — the LORD on high is mighty."<sup>1</sup> Jesus acted out this principle as an object lesson on the Sea of Galilee. We read in Mark's Gospel: "A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?' He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?' They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'"<sup>2</sup>

The gist of vv.12-14 is obviously that those who attack God's people will not prevail. V.14 states that disaster will strike the attacker suddenly. "In the evening, sudden terror! Before the morning, they are gone!" *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* applies this to the threat King Ahaz feared from the side of Damascus and Israel. We read: "They who league together against the people of God, as Damascus and Israel did against Judah, shall be brought to ruin. No strongholds can avail against the strength of Yahweh. Glory and prosperity are but of short duration when they are arrayed against the will of God. Yet such are God's mercy and faithfulness to His covenant of old with Israel that He still leaves gleanings of Ephraim—a remnant elected in grace—who are reserved for the mercy of God, about to be manifested to all Israel in the latter days. Then shall Jew and Gentile no longer look to their idols of any kind, but 'shall have respect to' their 'Maker' alone, 'the Holy One of Israel.' The root of Israel's sin, and therefore of Israel's sorrow, was, they 'forgot the God of their salvation, and were not mindful of the Rock of their strength.' Whenever any of us falls into this condemning sin, however prosperously our undertakings may 'flourish' like a plant 'in the morning,' yet, like Israel's league with Syria, they shall at last yield a 'harvest only of grief and desperate sorrow.'" But *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, more appropriately, considers this to be: "A graphic description of the coming invasion by the Assyrian host, with its various contingents of subject-allies under Sennacherib (heir of the conquerors of Damascus and Samaria). God would suddenly rebuke the Assyrians, declares the prophecy, in a night of terrible plague and destruction. So shall he eventually deal with all his foes and the armies they marshal against his cause."<sup>3</sup>

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes about the eighteenth chapter of Isaiah: "Isa. 18 is one of the most obscure prophecies in the whole Book of Isaiah. The subject of it, the end and design of it, the people to whom it is addressed, the history to which it belongs, the person who sends the messengers, and the nation to whom the messengers are sent, are all obscure and doubtful." J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, seems to be less at loss about its meaning. He heads the chapter "A signal to the world." We read: "In 715 BC the Ethiopian Piankhi mastered Egypt and founded the twenty-fifth (Ethiopian) Dynasty. He immediately sought to be a world statesman and began sending envoys to create an anti-Assyrian conglomerate. In 17:1–3 Isaiah examined the smaller exercise in the collective security of Aram and Ephraim. Here is a larger experiment on the same lines, which Isaiah depicts in universal terms so as to test out its validity as a possible answer to world needs. It failed in the microcosm of 17:1ff. How will it fare on the macrocosm of the world stage?"

Isaiah addresses the land of Cush, which is Ethiopia. He calls it "the land of whirring wings." *The King James Version* reads: "the land shadowing with wings." The Hebrew word *tseletsal* refers to a sound, like "a clatter," or the rattling of a harpoon, or even the clanging of a cymbal. We find the word for the first

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3. See Gen. 15:16.

1. Ps. 93:3,4

2. Mark 4:37-41

3. See II Kings 19:35.

time in the verse: “Swarms of *locusts* will take over all your trees and the crops of your land.”<sup>1</sup> But also in: “David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and *cymbals*.”<sup>2</sup> In the context of Isaiah’s prophecy it could be translated as “locust country.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “*Land of whirring wings*: Egypt with its profusion of flying insects. Isaiah does not name Egypt but allows the whirring to suggest a busy, restless world. Cush is the upper Nile region, Ethiopia. The whole impression therefore is of the known world (Egypt) stretching out along its great waterways to the remote and the unknown.”

In a rather amusing poetical manner Isaiah describes the letter-carrying ambassadors as being sent over sea in papyrus boats, representing Egypt’s postal service. The Ethiopians are describes as tall and smooth-skinned, probably indicating that their black skin is shiny. Although there may not have been much contact between Israel and the inland of Africa, the black Africans would not have been completely unknown after the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon. *The Pulpit Commentary* adds: “The Israelites first knew the Ethiopians as soldiers when they formed a part of the army brought by Shishak (Sheshonk I.) against Rehoboam, about B.C. 970 (... 2 Chronicles 12:3). They had afterwards experience of their vast numbers, when Zerah made his attack upon Asa; but on this occasion they succeeded in defeating them (... 2 Chronicles 14:9-13). It was not till about two centuries after this that the power of Ethiopia began to be really formidable to Egypt; and the ‘miserable Cushites,’ as they had been in the habit of calling them, acquired the preponderating influence in the valley of the Nile, and under Piankhi, Shabak, Shabatek, and Tirhakah (Tahark), reduced Egypt to subjection. Isaiah, perhaps, refers to their rise under Piankhi as ‘their beginning.’ ”

Having predicted the downfall of the northern invaders in the previous chapter, the prophet now turns south and forecasts the futility of the demonstration of power from the south.

The core of the message in vv.3-6 is God’s attitude amidst the tumult of the people surrounding Mount Zion, the place of His revelation on earth. There is a banner on Mount Zion and there is the sound of a trumpet, calling attention to the fact of God’s presence, but God Himself seems to be aloof and quiet. The surrounding noises of the world population do not affect Him. Isaiah describes God’s attitude “like shimmering heat in the sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest.” The two pictures do not seem to cover each other. The first suggests inactivity because of the intense heat and the other comfort and refreshing protection.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes about v.3: “We have already noticed (14:32; 16:4–5) how Isaiah can step into diplomatic situations and give his own, perhaps unpopular answer. This is what he does here. The mandate given to Piankhi’s envoys would have been to win foreign courts to an anti-Assyrian alliance, but their mission (2) now leads into Isaiah’s worldwide message (3). We can picture the scene: the envoys reach Jerusalem and Isaiah takes the opportunity to publicize what he would say to the whole world in the name of the Lord. He would, in fact, send them on their way as his envoys. He addresses the *world* (3ab); he calls for universal expectancy. A *banner* (also 11:10) will be raised; a *trumpet* (also 27:13) sounded – the combination of the visible and the audible suggesting that there will be every opportunity to be aware. Thirdly, he appeals for a response: ‘oh, do see ... hear!’ is more suitable than the equally accurate *you will see ...*”

It is difficult to accept that Isaiah’s words would only have a limited application to the people and times of that particular episode in world history. The promised raising of the banner, the sounding of the trumpet and God’s apparent quiet aloofness seem all to point to the end of times. God is ready to reveal Himself to the whole world in Jesus’ Second Coming. God’s lingering caused the Apostle Peter to write: “First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this ‘coming’ ‘he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything

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1. Deut. 28:42

2. II Sam. 6:5

goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.’ But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.” The fact that there are and have been so many wars that seemed to sound in the end of times has dulled the expectancy of some people. On the other hand the excited expectancy of some believers at every outburst of violence on earth that looks like it might be the end has been demonstrated so often that it has become “déjà vu.” All of which reinforces the truth that when the day of the Lord does arrive, it will be like the coming of a thief in the night.

In vv.5 and 6 Isaiah again mixes his metaphors. The image is of a grapevine that is cut down. This is not pruning for the purposes of increasing the yield, it is destruction. The question is what or who does this grapevine symbolize? Some Bible scholars believe it stands for the enemy’s plans to destroy Judah. Sennacherib’s plan to conquer Judah was cut off prematurely during the reign of Hezekiah. In an earlier chapter a similar image was used in the context of a prophecy against Assyria. We read: “See, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will lop off the boughs with great power. The lofty trees will be felled, the tall ones will be brought low. He will cut down the forest thickets with an ax; Lebanon will fall before the Mighty One.”<sup>1</sup> The mention of Lebanon does not necessarily mean that the prophecy pertains to that country. “The lofty trees” were mainly found in Lebanon’s cedar forest. More often than not, Israel is represented as a grapevine, but that does not mean that the icon could not be applied to any other nation.

But birds of prey do not feed on fruit trees; they gorge themselves on dead bodies. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments here: “At length imagery is dropped. The vine is shown to be an army, slaughtered all ‘together,’ and left a prey to kites and vultures, jackals and hyenas ... They will furnish food to the beasts and birds of prey for the remainder of the year.” Whether the imagery is dropped or not is up for discussion. The images seem to be too violent to speak of Judah’s Babylonian captivity. V.7 concludes that Ethiopia will bring gifts to the Lord in Jerusalem. On this *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “It would not be at all improbable that Tirhakah should, after the destruction of Sennacherib’s army, send a gift to the temple of the Jews, either as a recognition of the miracle wrought by Jehovah, or simply as a thank offering. Necho sent the armor in which he had fought at Megiddo to the temple of Apollo at Branchidae, near Miletus, as a thank offering. We have, however, no historical record of Tirhakah’s present as sent.” This prophecy was definitely fulfilled when the Ethiopian treasurer of Queen Candace came to Jerusalem to worship and found salvation in Christ on the basis of Isaiah’s prophecy.<sup>2</sup> But the Ethiopians are only part of those who will come to bring their presents to the Lord. The Psalmist records God as saying: “I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me — Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush — and will say, ‘This one was born in Zion.’ Indeed, of Zion it will be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.’ The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: ‘This one was born in Zion.’”<sup>3</sup>

v. Egypt: one world, one people, one God (19:1–20:6)

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1. Isa. 10:33,34
  2. Acts 8:26-40
  3. Ps. 87:4-6

*1 An oracle concerning Egypt: See, the LORD rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt. The idols of Egypt tremble before him, and the hearts of the Egyptians melt within them.*

*2 "I will stir up Egyptian against Egyptian — brother will fight against brother, neighbor against neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom.*

*3 The Egyptians will lose heart, and I will bring their plans to nothing; they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead, the mediums and the spiritists.*

*4 I will hand the Egyptians over to the power of a cruel master, and a fierce king will rule over them," declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.*

*5 The waters of the river will dry up, and the riverbed will be parched and dry.*

*6 The canals will stink; the streams of Egypt will dwindle and dry up. The reeds and rushes will wither, 7 also the plants along the Nile, at the mouth of the river. Every sown field along the Nile will become parched, will blow away and be no more.*

*8 The fishermen will groan and lament, all who cast hooks into the Nile; those who throw nets on the water will pine away.*

*9 Those who work with combed flax will despair, the weavers of fine linen will lose hope.*

*10 The workers in cloth will be dejected, and all the wage earners will be sick at heart.*

*11 The officials of Zoan are nothing but fools; the wise counselors of Pharaoh give senseless advice. How can you say to Pharaoh, "I am one of the wise men, a disciple of the ancient kings"?*

*12 Where are your wise men now? Let them show you and make known what the LORD Almighty has planned against Egypt.*

*13 The officials of Zoan have become fools, the leaders of Memphis are deceived; the cornerstones of her peoples have led Egypt astray.*

*14 The LORD has poured into them a spirit of dizziness; they make Egypt stagger in all that she does, as a drunkard staggers around in his vomit.*

*15 There is nothing Egypt can do — head or tail, palm branch or reed.*

*16 In that day the Egyptians will be like women. They will shudder with fear at the uplifted hand that the LORD Almighty raises against them.*

*17 And the land of Judah will bring terror to the Egyptians; everyone to whom Judah is mentioned will be terrified, because of what the LORD Almighty is planning against them.*

*18 In that day five cities in Egypt will speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD Almighty. One of them will be called the City of Destruction.*

*19 In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the heart of Egypt, and a monument to the LORD at its border.*

*20 It will be a sign and witness to the LORD Almighty in the land of Egypt. When they cry out to the LORD because of their oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and he will rescue them.*

*21 So the LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the LORD. They will worship with sacrifices and grain offerings; they will make vows to the LORD and keep them.*

*22 The LORD will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the LORD, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them.*

*23 In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together.*

*24 In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth.*

*25 The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."*

*Chapter 20:1 - In the year that the supreme commander, sent by Sargon king of Assyria, came to Ashdod and attacked and captured it —*

*2 at that time the LORD spoke through Isaiah son of Amoz. He said to him, "Take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet." And he did so, going around stripped and barefoot.*

**3 Then the LORD said, "Just as my servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush,**

**4 so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old, with buttocks bared — to Egypt's shame.**

**5 Those who trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt will be afraid and put to shame.**

**6 In that day the people who live on this coast will say, 'See what has happened to those we relied on, those we fled to for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria! How then can we escape?'"**

Introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "This final oracle in the first series of five fits into the sequence in two main ways. First, it follows logically from its immediate predecessor. According to chapters 17 – 18, even though Ephraim had sunk its identity in the world, it still retained its glory (17:3) and therefore its hope (17:6), but, possibly even more wonderfully, the Gentiles with whom they had identified to their loss would, 'in that day,' share the glory with them (17:4). Isaiah then broadened this vision beyond Damascus to a people coming to Zion from 'far and wide' (18:7). But on what terms do they come? Isaiah replies in 19:24–25: one world, one people, one God. He proclaims the vision which Paul saw fulfilled (Eph.3:6). Secondly, the series began with Babylon (13:1 – 14:27) linked with Assyria as an interim fulfillment, and now it ends with Egypt. Thus the contemporary superpower threat to the continuance of the kingdoms of the people of the Lord is linked with the first superpower threat: the Lord is sovereign over the 'powers' of earth and it is, in the end, his kingdom and not theirs that triumphs. In the first oracle, the Mesopotamian powers of Babylon and Assyria were associated as a major prediction (13:1 – 14:23) and its interim fulfillment; in this final oracle, the major prediction focuses on Egypt (19:1–25) and it is followed by an interim fulfillment (20:1–6), in which the two southern powers, Egypt and Cush, are linked. The chapters fit equally snugly into the history of the times. When the northern treaty powers, Aram and Ephraim, were swallowed up by Assyria, the political center of gravity moved south. At least from 715 BC onwards Egypt was ceaselessly active in fomenting anti-Assyria feeling in the remaining Palestinian states, and the possibility of recovering national sovereign independence from Assyria by means of an Egyptian alliance was a constant temptation to the politically ambitious leaders of Judah (see chs. 28ff.). Isaiah resolutely opposed this – holding to the truth he enunciated in the Ephraim oracle (17:1–11) that worldly alliance was a death warrant (*cf.* 28:15). Consequently, the burden of 19:1–15 is to dissuade his people from having anything to do with a people itself destined to collapse. It would have been strange indeed, in the light of Egypt's intriguing and Judah's willingness to go along with it, if Isaiah had not turned his formidable powers of diagnosis and forecast on Egypt's present and future. In 19:1–15 the smiting of Egypt is predicted, but this is followed by a vision of the healing of Egypt and the bringing of even the threatening superpowers Egypt and Assyria, into a spiritual union and unity with Israel (19:16–25). Then, by way of interim fulfillment – the imminent experience guaranteeing the undated – the smiting of Egypt is exemplified (20:1–6) in a particular historical event."

More than meting out punishment to the people of Egypt, God turns Himself against the evil powers that control the behavior of the Egyptians. We saw the same thing happening during Israel's exodus from Egypt. Announcing the twelfth and last plague over Egypt, God said to Moses: "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn — both men and animals — and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD."<sup>1</sup> It is important to realize that what God does with Satan will have a dramatic impact upon those who have allowed themselves to be controlled and manipulated by demonic powers. And the demons knew what was coming to them, even though they may have kept that knowledge from the humans they tried to rule. When Jesus saved the man who was possessed by the legion of demons, the evil spirits in him made him cry at the top of his voice: "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won't torture me!"<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ex. 12:12

Isaiah describes God's moving to Egypt as riding on a swift cloud. That picture is used frequently in Scripture. David saw God coming to his rescue that way. We read: "He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind."<sup>1</sup> And the Psalmist proclaims: "He makes the clouds his chariot and rides on the wings of the wind."<sup>2</sup> Jesus' Second Coming is predicted by Daniel as "coming with the clouds of heaven." We read: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence."<sup>3</sup> And Jesus Himself stated: "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory."<sup>4</sup>

The immediate result of God's visitation of Egypt is civil war. There is probably a double cause for this reaction: the demonic powers try to keep control of the situation, which they do best in revolutions; and some Egyptians will respond positively to God's presence while other oppose Him. Jesus says that this is generally the result of God's presence. Taking a quote from Micah<sup>5</sup>, He told His disciples: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'"<sup>6</sup> The confusion will not end until the coming of a cruel and absolute dictatorship. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: "The fulfillment of this prediction could have been the rule of Piankhi himself (715 BC), Sargon's conquest (*cf.* 20:1–6), or Sennacherib, or the invasion of Egypt by Esarhaddon (680), Ashurbanipal (668) or Artaxerxes III Ochus (343). But much more important is the recognition that social problems arise from a spiritual root: the coming of the Lord in judgment (1) and his direct action in human affairs (2–4). Divisiveness (2) and ineffectiveness (3ab) are symptoms, not maladies. Those who flocked to the cults at least saw that a spiritual solution was needed even though their solution was in fact another symptom of the real problem. Faced with all this disintegration, why not try force where appeal has failed (4)? If people will not do what they ought to do, they will do what they are made to do! But this also is a symptom, not the malady: the malady (1) is that they are not right with God."

On the point who the "cruel master" is, every Bible scholar seems to have his own opinion. Motyer's listing of the various possibilities is probably the best that can be done objectively.

The drying up of the River Nile put a death knell on Egypt. The river is its lifeline and insufficient rainfall in the countries that feed their water into it meant severe drought and famine in that whole part of Africa. In vv.5-10 Isaiah gives a vivid description of the consequences of this drought. It will affect the ecology and pollute the atmosphere. The irrigation canals that make agriculture possible would become useless. This means crop failure. It means the end of fishery and of the whole clothing industry, dependant on the harvest of flax to make linen. It is a complete collapse of Egypt's infrastructure. The fact that the country as a whole depended on one single factor, the condition of its one river, made Egypt very vulnerable. That ought to have made the Egyptians understand their personal vulnerability. As Egypt depended on its river, so we depend on God who can cut off our supply of oxygen.

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2. Mark 5:7
  1. Ps. 18:10
  2. Ps. 104:3
  3. Daniel 7:13
  4. Matt. 24:30
  5. Micah 7:6
  6. Matt. 10:34-36

In vv.11-15 Isaiah shows that it is exactly at this point the Egyptians failed. They failed to recognize their dependence upon God. That made them into fools, beginning with those who governed the country. Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states here: “In these verses *wise* occurs three times, ‘princes’ (the civil service arm of government) appears twice as *officials* and once as *leaders*, and the idea of ‘counsel,’ noun and verb, three times. In a word, Isaiah turns to the ‘Cabinet’ and the executive. Here folly reigns (13), bewilderment (*dizziness*, 14), uncertainty (14cd) and helplessness (15). For all their claims the leaders are unenlightened (11), undiscerning (12) and misleading (13). So what should they do? Change the government? But once more this is to deal with symptom, not malady. Why are the leaders so foolish, undiscerning *etc.*? Because the Lord has acted against them (14). Once more the problem is spiritual.”

What God plans to do to Egypt will cause debilitating fear among the Egyptians. Four times Isaiah mentions God’s omnipotence in these verses: “the LORD Almighty.”<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew title is *Yahweh Tsabaaowt*, literally “Lord of hosts.” Although the earthly powers at that time consisted of Assyria and Egypt, the supreme commander, the one who controls everything, is God, not some human power.

We must remember that Isaiah’s words in v.16, “In that day the Egyptians will be like women” were spoken in a man’s world. This is not the place to determine if or how much our world has changed. It remains insulting to a man to be called “woman.” Nahum inflicted the ultimate insult upon the Assyrian army by shouting: “Look at your troops — they are all women! The gates of your land are wide open to your enemies; fire has consumed their bars.”<sup>2</sup>

Bible scholars believe that the Egyptian fear of Judah was because Assyria controlled Judah and could easily attack Egypt via Palestine. But *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “This is how Isaiah views the Assyrian attacks on Egypt, not how the Egyptians viewed them. The fear felt by the Egyptians was not a religious fear. They simply dreaded the Assyrian armies, and Judea as the country from which the expeditions seemed to issue.”

About the five cities in Egypt, mentioned in v.18, Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says: “The details of this second aspect of the Day are difficult to understand. What are the *five cities*? Why is *one* (or perhaps ‘each’) *called the City of Destruction*? Yet amid all the obscurity the central truth is plain: following on the fear of the Lord (16) there will be a turning to the Lord, marked by the adoption of the language of Canaan.” *The New International Version* states in a footnote of v.18: “Most manuscripts of the Masoretic Text; some manuscripts of the Masoretic Text, Dead Sea Scrolls and Vulgate City of the Sun (that is, Heliopolis).”

In the last section of this chapter, vv.19-25, Isaiah describes the conversion of Egypt and Assyria and their relationship with Israel to become “a blessing on the earth.” Today, three millennia later, this prophecy has not yet been fulfilled. As a matter of fact, a glance at the political and religious condition of the Middle East would make us conclude that the opposite has occurred. Should we say that this is God’s “wishful thinking”? Is this what God wants to happen, but it does not? This vision was never realized in Isaiah’s day. There may have been profitable trade relations between Egypt and Assyria, involving Israel, but the highway that connect the three nations in spiritual matters was never built and still does not exist.

Most Bible scholars believe that Isaiah speaks of the influence Jewish settlers had on the areas of their captivity or resettlement. The translation of the Old Testament Scriptures in Greek, *The Septuagint*, was made in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. History records that a priest named Onias erected, in fact, an altar to Yahweh during the reign of Ptolemy VI. But, as *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The more complete fulfillment was doubtless after Pentecost, when Christianity was preached and established in Egypt and Libya on the one hand, in Parthia, and Media, and Elam, and Mesopotamia on the other (...Acts 2:9, 10).” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* believes that the prophecy to be “A forecast of the harmonious relations to be established by the spread of the Gospel to all the lands of the Fertile Crescent prior to the Mohammedan

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1. Isa. 19:16,18,20,25

2. Nah. 3:13

conquest. And this in turn is but a foregleam of that final and more lasting peace that will be established between East and West in the days of the Messiah.”

In the short twentieth chapter of his book Isaiah seems to contradict what he prophesied in the preceding verses. Instead of a harmonious Gospel relationship between Egypt and Assyria, the prophet describes an Assyrian invasion of Egypt and a treatment of the Egyptians that is more than embarrassing.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, explains: “The narrative is included here as an interim fulfillment. Isaiah has outlined a world hope (19:24–25), in which three nations of his own day figured: his own people, the imperial Assyria and the would-be imperial Egypt. His vision was that these three would become one people under one God. If this sounded incredible, then his contemporaries observe how the word of the Lord is fulfilled in the outworking of world events, even when superpowers are involved.” The Egyptians were to be stripped and paraded naked into captivity. More embarrassing even is the fact that Isaiah has to demonstrate by way of object lesson how this is done. The word “stripped” used by *The New International Version* is ‘*arom*’ in Hebrew. It means “nude, either partially or totally.” The first time the word is used in Scripture is in the verse that describes Adam and Eve: “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that in the case of the first human couple, the word indicates a complete absence of clothing. The second time is in Job’s pronouncement: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.”<sup>2</sup> In Job’s case we understand that he was nude at birth, but not necessarily completely naked at his death. It seems doubtful that Isaiah would have been able to walk around completely naked in public for three years. But it is quite possible that the Assyrians stripped their victims completely as they led them into captivity. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* takes a milder view of these verses, stating: “He did so walking naked - rather, uncovered. He merely put off the outer sackcloth, retaining still the tunic, or inner vest (1 Sam 19:24; Amos 2:16; John 21:7): an emblem to show that Egypt should be stripped of its possessions. The very dress of Isaiah was a silent exhortation to repentance.”

*Halley’s Handbook* states about the topic of Egypt and Ethiopia: “Isaiah’s warning of their defeat and captivity, intended to discourage Judah from looking to Egypt for aid against Assyria. This was 713 BC. The prediction was fulfilled 12 years later. Sennacherib’s annals for 701 BC says: ‘I fought with the kings of Egypt, accomplished their overthrow, and captured alive charioteers and sons of the king.’ Esarhaddon further desolated Egypt.”

- b. The second series of oracles: the long night and the dawn (21–23)
  - i. The desert by the sea: the Babylon principle (21:1–10)

***1 An oracle concerning the Desert by the Sea: Like whirlwinds sweeping through the southland, an invader comes from the desert, from a land of terror.***

***2 A dire vision has been shown to me: The traitor betrays, the looter takes loot. Elam, attack! Media, lay siege! I will bring to an end all the groaning she caused.***

***3 At this my body is racked with pain, pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor; I am staggered by what I hear, I am bewildered by what I see.***

***4 My heart falters, fear makes me tremble; the twilight I longed for has become a horror to me.***

***5 They set the tables, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink! Get up, you officers, oil the shields!***

***6 This is what the Lord says to me: "Go, post a lookout and have him report what he sees.***

***7 When he sees chariots with teams of horses, riders on donkeys or riders on camels, let him be alert, fully alert."***

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1. Gen. 2:25

2. Job 1:21

**8 And the lookout shouted, "Day after day, my lord, I stand on the watchtower; every night I stay at my post.**

**9 Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses. And he gives back the answer: 'Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!'"**

**10 O my people, crushed on the threshing floor, I tell you what I have heard from the LORD Almighty, from the God of Israel.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes about this second series of oracles: "This series begins with a vision of such horror that Isaiah recoils from it (21:1–10); this is followed by a voice calling out of darkness and being promised more darkness (21:11–12); then come Arabian tribes in the desert without necessary supplies (21:13–17), followed by Jerusalem committing the unforgivable sin (22:14). The light at the end of the tunnel is the oracle on Tyre (23:18) where age-long materialism becomes sharing and outright worldliness becomes holiness to the Lord. It was suggested above ... that the enigmatic titles are Isaiah's way of showing that he has left the sharp clarity of his contemporary scene and is looking into the future. If so, history is not a tale of everything getting better and better. Rather, divine judgments become starker, problems remain unsolved and the people of God live below their dignity. Yet even so, darkness is streaked by the light of dawn."

The clearest thing that can be said about the first ten verses of this chapter is that the prophet predicts the fall of Babylon. But why the heading calls this "An oracle concerning the Desert by the Sea" is far from clear. *Barnes' Notes* observes: "There have been almost as many interpretations of this expression, as there have been interpreters. That it means Babylon, or the country about Babylon, there can be no doubt; but the question why this phrase was applied, has given rise to a great diversity of opinions. The term 'desert' *midbaar* is usually applied to a wilderness, or to a comparatively barren and uncultivated country—a place for flocks and herds (Ps 65:13; Jer 9:9 ff); to an actual waste, sandy desert (Isa 32:15; 35:1); and particularly to the deserts of Arabia (Gen 14:6; 16:7; Deut 11:24). It may here be applied to Babylon either historically, as having been 'once' an unreclaimed desert: or by 'anticipation,' as descriptive of what it 'would be' after it should be destroyed by Cyrus, or possibly both these ideas may have been combined. That it was 'once' a desert before it was reclaimed by Semiramis is the testimony of all history; that it is 'now' a vast waste is the united testimony of all travelers. There is every reason to think that a large part of the country about Babylon was formerly overflowed with water 'before' it was reclaimed by dykes; and as it was naturally a waste, when the artificial dykes and dams should be removed, it would again be a desert." *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that the expression may not have been part of Isaiah's original document. But that sounds like too easy a way to deal with all textual problems.

Deserts and seas are, of course, extreme opposites; one has what the other lacks. The expression may suggest that Babylon failed to use the natural blessings and resources that God had put at her disposal and consequently deprived herself of her reason for existence. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, gives an explanation along the lines of symbolism. He believes that the verses may refer to the fall of Babylon by the hand of Sennacherib of Assyria. We read: "According to verse 9, this first oracle predicts the fall of Babylon. But which fall? The one which most readily matches the terms of Isaiah's vision is the overthrow of the city by Sennacherib in 689 BC. This certainly matched the vision's ferocity, for Sennacherib records that he filled the city with corpses and, as for 'the gods dwelling therein, the hands of my people took them and smashed them.' Buildings were razed and, as a final gesture, 'huge volumes of water (were) released over the ruins.' "

As we dig into this chapter, it becomes clear that both the structure and the message are more complicated than meets the eye. It seems that the core message is the fall of Babylon, as the messenger announces in v.9. But the question is not only, as Motyer asked, "Which fall?" it is also that there will be, in Motyer's words, "a Babylon principle operating in world history." We see this more clearly in Revelation, the book in which all lines of history come together. There, Babylon the Great is depicted as the mother of

prostitutes, the source and symbol of all human corruption.<sup>1</sup> Babylon has become Satan's main project in this world. It is his masterpiece of corruption and decay of all human values and morals.

Isaiah sees this in the vision of a desert storm coming to bring destruction. Ironically, one well-known military campaign in recent history was called "Desert Storm." The Hebrew text does not have the word "invader." It reads literally: "As whirlwinds in the south pass through from the desert; so it comes from a terrible land." Elam seems to be one of the illusive elements in this prophecy. Originally, it was the name of the son of Shem;<sup>2</sup> it is also the name given to a region east of Babylon and part of later Persia. Isaiah mentioned Elam earlier as one of the places from which the Lord would bring back the captives of Israel. We read: "In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from *Elam*, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea."<sup>3</sup> The reference here seems to be to the Persian conquest of Babylon. This would mean that in v.1, Isaiah sees the Babylonians coming down to conquer Israel and in v.2 he sees them being defeated by Persia.

The vision has a dramatic impact upon Isaiah personally. Vv.3 and 4 describe his very emotional reaction to what God shows him. It makes him violently sick. The dark night of his emotional suffering leads into a new day of horror. Or does the prophet describe here what will happen to the nation of Israel as a whole? That probably too! Or does he look at the events from God's perspective, and does he experiences some of God's own suffering over the conditions of the world at that time? That most of all! It is difficult for us to imagine that God could suffer. The fact that we are created in His image ought to tell us that our emotions are derived from His. That our God is not immune to suffering is clear from the statement in Hebrews: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin."<sup>4</sup>

The instigators of all this misery are depicted as celebrating their upcoming victory with a copious dinner and then getting ready for the battle. "Oiling the shields" may be symbolic of the philosophy that leads to the battle. The shields are consecrated for "a holy war" of which we have seen too many in world history. Like Habakkuk, Isaiah takes up his position as a watchman. In a similar situation, Habakkuk writes: "I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint."<sup>5</sup>

The theme of vv.6-8 is "watch." God tells Isaiah to post a lookout. Some Bible scholars interpret this as Isaiah's having to become the watchman. The Hebrew word *tsaphah* literally means "to lean forward," or "to peer into the distance." J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: "The watchman is, of course, the prophet, and the verses give an insight into the demands of the prophetic office: resolute to declare only what he saw (6), intrinsic reliability of character (7), disciplined to wait until he has a sure message to declare (8)." Not everyone agrees with Motyer. *The Pulpit Commentary*, for instance, states: "The event is not to be immediate, it is to be watched for; and Isaiah is not to watch himself, but to set the watchman. Moreover, the watchman waits long before he sees anything (ver. 8). These unusual features of the narrative seem to mark a remote, not a near, accomplishment of the prophecy."

Jesus emphasizes the need for everyone to watch in regard to His return. Comparing every believer to a servant, serving in the absence of the master of the house, He says: "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back — whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I

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1. See Rev. 17 and 18.
  2. Gen. 10:22
  3. Isa. 11:11
  4. Heb. 4:15
  5. Hab. 2:1

say to everyone: ‘Watch!’ ”<sup>1</sup> In Isaiah’s prophecy, the watchman does more than be ready himself when the predicted event occurs; he issues a warning to others. The message “Babylon has fallen, has fallen!” is Good News that must be preached to others who believe that Babylon still has power over their lives. This message corresponds to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, about which the author of Hebrews writes: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”<sup>2</sup>

*The New International Version* states in a footnote to the word “lookout” in v.8: “Dead Sea Scrolls and Syriac; Masoretic Text ‘A lion.’ ” In v.10 we see again the same deep emotions as in vv.3 and 4. In using the words “my people,” Isaiah identifies himself with God and His compassion. He sees Israel as “crushed on the threshing floor.” The image speaks at the same time about the kind of suffering God’s people endure and about the purpose of their pain. It is Satan who does the threshing, who inflicts the pain. His purpose is to hurt and destroy. But the actual reason for threshing wheat is to separate the kernel from the chaff. Predicting Peter’s denial, Jesus said to him: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail,”<sup>3</sup> indicating that what Satan had in mind was not what God intended. God used Satan’s stratagem to separate the wheat from the chaff in Peter’s life, which was not what the devil had in mind. We must always bear in mind, when we feel as if we have been crushed at the threshing floor, that God allowed the enemy to do this to us, not to crush us but to cleanse and purge. It is the enemy who is crushed. Babylon is fallen, is fallen!

- ii. Silence: days of darkness (21:11–12)

***11 An oracle concerning Dumah: Someone calls to me from Seir, "Watchman, what is left of the night? Watchman, what is left of the night?"***

***12 The watchman replies, "Morning is coming, but also the night. If you would ask, then ask; and come back yet again."***

A footnote in *The New International Version* explains: “Dumah means silence or stillness, a wordplay on Edom.” The use of this word in reference to Edom seems to indicate that Isaiah’s answer is actually no answer at all.

In introducing these two verses, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, makes the following interesting observations: “Passages like 2 Kings 8:7ff. show that prophets were approached by people of other nations. It could well be that in the frenzied diplomatic activity prompted by the Assyrian threat Edomites came to Jerusalem and one sought out Isaiah for counsel. We cannot know whether this was so or whether Isaiah was privately meditating on the agony Edom too was suffering under Assyria. Sargon campaigned there in 715 BC. But we feel the poignancy of a lone voice in the darkness and of the change with the prophet: ‘What can you tell me? I can tell you nothing. Will things change? No, they will not. Even if morning comes, night comes fast behind it.’ In its setting the matching pentad of oracles, this corresponds to the Philistine oracle in 14:28–32. The Philistines mistook the signs of the times and thought David’s dynasty was defunct. They needed to be made aware of a coming, mightier fruit from David’s root. But, in response to the Edomite cry, Isaiah warns that the true dawn is in the undated future and in the meantime darkness predominates. The watchman of verse 6 is still watching; the crushing of verse 10 is still unhealed. Things go on as they have always done (2 Pet. 3:4), yet it is always worthwhile to ask how much of the night is left, for darkness will not have the last word (Rom. 13:11–12). Thus a solitary Gentile mirrors world history: the end will come;

1. Mark 13:35-37
2. Heb. 2:14,15
3. Luke 22:31,32

the end is not yet. Hope lies in the future (12ab) and though it is deferred it is sure (12cd).” The reference from II Peter reads: “They will say, ‘Where is this ‘coming’ ‘he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.’ ” The one from Romans: “And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

iii. Desert evening: Gentile needs unsolved (21:13–17)

**13 An oracle concerning Arabia: You caravans of Dedanites, who camp in the thickets of Arabia,  
14 bring water for the thirsty; you who live in Tema, bring food for the fugitives.  
15 They flee from the sword, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow and from the heat of battle.  
16 This is what the Lord says to me: "Within one year, as a servant bound by contract would count it, all the pomp of Kedar will come to an end.  
17 The survivors of the bowmen, the warriors of Kedar, will be few." The LORD, the God of Israel, has spoken.**

On these verses, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, reflects: “Once more the historical background is the Assyrian crisis. In 715 BC Sargon campaigned against tribes living between Tema (an oasis city far south of Elath and east of the Red Sea) and the Gulf of Aqaba; in 703 Arabs joined Merodach-Baladan in rebellion and were crushed by Sennacherib. Isaiah depicts the Arabian tribe of the Dedanites fleeing from the war and Tema is urged to succor them. The Gentile world in its need seeks to be self-sufficient in mutual aid. The interim fulfillment (16–17) puts paid to any hope that collective security will save it.”

The Hebrew text contains constructions that have raised problems of interpretation among Bible scholars. *The New International Version* gives one of these interpretations to which not every scholar agrees. *Young’s Literal Translation* of these verses reads: “The burden on Arabia. In a forest in Arabia ye lodge, O travelers of Dedanim. To meet the thirsty brought water have Inhabitants of the land of Tema, with his bread they came before a fugitive. For from the face of destructions they fled, from the face of a stretched-out sword, And from the face of a trodden bow, And from the face of the grievousness of battle. For thus said the Lord unto me: ‘Within a year, as years of a hireling, Consumed hath been all the honor of Kedar. And the remnant of the number of bow-men, The mighty of the sons of Kedar are few, For Jehovah, God of Israel, hath spoken!’ ” *The New Living Translation* reads: “This message came to me concerning Arabia: O caravans from Dedan, hide in the deserts of Arabia. O people of Tema, bring food and water to these weary refugees. They have fled from drawn swords and sharp arrows and the terrors of war. ‘But within a year,’ says the Lord, ‘all the glory of Kedar will come to an end. Only a few of its courageous archers will survive. I, the LORD, the God of Israel, have spoken!’ ”

iv. The Valley of Vision: the unforgivable sin (22:1–25)

**1 An oracle concerning the Valley of Vision: What troubles you now, that you have all gone up on the roofs,  
2 O town full of commotion, O city of tumult and revelry? Your slain were not killed by the sword, nor did they die in battle.  
3 All your leaders have fled together; they have been captured without using the bow. All you who were caught were taken prisoner together, having fled while the enemy was still far away.  
4 Therefore I said, "Turn away from me; let me weep bitterly. Do not try to console me over the destruction of my people."  
5 The Lord, the LORD Almighty, has a day of tumult and trampling and terror in the Valley of Vision, a day of battering down walls and of crying out to the mountains.**

**6** *Elam takes up the quiver, with her charioteers and horses; Kir uncovers the shield.*  
**7** *Your choicest valleys are full of chariots, and horsemen are posted at the city gates;*  
**8** *the defenses of Judah are stripped away. And you looked in that day to the weapons in the Palace of the Forest;*  
**9** *you saw that the City of David had many breaches in its defenses; you stored up water in the Lower Pool.*  
**10** *You counted the buildings in Jerusalem and tore down houses to strengthen the wall.*  
**11** *You built a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the Old Pool, but you did not look to the One who made it, or have regard for the One who planned it long ago.*  
**12** *The Lord, the LORD Almighty, called you on that day to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth.*  
**13** *But see, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine! "Let us eat and drink," you say, "for tomorrow we die!"*  
**14** *The LORD Almighty has revealed this in my hearing: "Till your dying day this sin will not be atoned for," says the Lord, the LORD Almighty.*  
**15** *This is what the Lord, the LORD Almighty, says: "Go, say to this steward, to Shebna, who is in charge of the palace:*  
**16** *What are you doing here and who gave you permission to cut out a grave for yourself here, hewing your grave on the height and chiseling your resting place in the rock?*  
**17** *"Beware, the LORD is about to take firm hold of you and hurl you away, O you mighty man.*  
**18** *He will roll you up tightly like a ball and throw you into a large country. There you will die and there your splendid chariots will remain — you disgrace to your master's house!*  
**19** *I will depose you from your office, and you will be ousted from your position.*  
**20** *"In that day I will summon my servant, Eliakim son of Hilkiyah.*  
**21** *I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him and hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.*  
**22** *I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.*  
**23** *I will drive him like a peg into a firm place; he will be a seat of honor for the house of his father.*  
**24** *All the glory of his family will hang on him: its offspring and offshoots — all its lesser vessels, from the bowls to all the jars.*  
**25** *"In that day," declares the LORD Almighty, "the peg driven into the firm place will give way; it will be sheared off and will fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut down." The LORD has spoken.*

The first thing that catches our attention is the phrase “Valley of Vision.” The Hebrew word used is *chizzayown*, which is used sparingly in Scripture. In Isaiah it is only found twice in this chapter. The word means “a revelation.” As such it is used in the verse: “Nathan reported to David all the words of this entire revelation.”<sup>1</sup> It also occurs in the famous verse: “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.”<sup>2</sup> Visions or revelations are usually associated with high places, not with valleys. Some Bible scholars interpret the phrase as pertaining to the landscape. Jerusalem, which is the obvious subject of the prophecy, lies on a hill that is lower than the surrounding mountains. But that would hardly qualify the location as a “valley.” It seems more logical to apply “valley” to the content of the message. Isaiah’s words are spiritually spoken from “the valley of the shadow of death.”<sup>3</sup>

1. II Sam. 7:17
2. Joel 2:28
3. See Ps. 23:4.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on “the Valley of Vision”: “We are thus alerted to the fact that this oracle too operates on two levels: the factual level of reasonably datable events, and the visionary level of principles which those events exemplified and which will continue to operate in the undated future. At first sight the oracle is a strange mixture of the national (1–14) and the personal (15–25), the city (1–14) and the individual (15–19, 20–25), and it would be easy to question the appropriateness here of addresses about Shebna (15–19) and Eliakim (20–25), not least because no other oracles in chapters 13 – 27 concern themselves with named individuals. Closer examination is illuminating. The charge laid at the door of Jerusalem is the choice of self-sufficiency. The key verses (8b–11) tell how in their crisis the Jerusalem people relied on their arsenal (8b), cannibalized the city to strengthen the walls (10) and secured a safe water-supply (9b, 11). *Shebna* is revealed as an important official in whom the spirit of self-reliance is incarnate: he is a man who can take care of his present repute (18d) and provide for his continuing glory (16). In a different way *Eliakim* (20–25) would be caught in the same trap if he should come to see himself and allow himself to be seen as the chief support of others, the indispensable man ... In a word, the ‘story-line’ of the whole oracle is the question, Where is security found? In Isaiah’s teaching, when the city (1–14), individual (15–19) and family ((20–25) become self-sufficient, they have committed the unforgivable sin.”

The mention of the two officers Shebna and Eliakim pinpoints the message of this prophecy at the time of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem during the reign of Hezekiah. We read in Second Kings: “The king of Assyria sent his supreme commander, his chief officer and his field commander with a large army, from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. They came up to Jerusalem and stopped at the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman’s Field. They called for the king; and Eliakim son of Hilkiah the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph the recorder went out to them.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, some Bible scholars believe that the prophecy focuses on a later time. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, for instance, states: “The language of Isa 22:12-13, and 14, as to the infidelity and consequent utter ruin of the Jews, seems more fully to foreshadow the destruction by Nebuchadnezzar in Zedekiah’s reign, and cannot be restricted to Hezekiah’s time.” It is not uncommon for a prophecy to have more than one application.

In the first four verses of this chapter, Isaiah weeps over a captivity that surpasses any physical experience of being led away. Here again, we could say that Isaiah’s tears are God’s tears. The prophet shares in God’s emotions over the condition of His people. Nebuchadnezzar would take the people of Judah into captivity more than a century after Isaiah uttered this prophecy, but they were already captives of another power that was not one of flesh and blood. Their physical imprisonment would merely be the logical outcome of their inner captivity. Jesus said: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”<sup>2</sup> Israel’s history gives us a protracted illustration as proof of Jesus’ words. When God led His people out of slavery in Egypt, they remained slaves until they died in the desert. A person is only free if God has set him free inwardly; whether he is physically incarcerated or not makes no difference. After Nebuchadnezzar led the people from Judah away, Jeremiah wrote *The Book of Lamentations*. Isaiah writes here another lamentation about a captivity that is more serious and fatal than the one Jeremiah wept about. Isaiah’s tears foreshadow the tears of our Lord Jesus Christ, who wept over Jerusalem. We read: “As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.’”<sup>3</sup>

The Hebrew text of v.4 has more emotional depth than the English translation expresses; it reads literally: “I will weep, labor not to comfort me because of the spoiling of the daughter of my people.” The

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1. II Kings 18:17,18
  2. John 8:34

expression “daughter of my people” is only found here in Isaiah. Jeremiah used the term more frequently.<sup>1</sup> A Hebrew word related to this is found in the verse: “whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye.”<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah describes Jerusalem as defenseless. The leaders of the people and the population of the city were killed by the enemy of their souls without a shot being fired. We could turn the image around and say that God besieged Jerusalem to recapture the city. Every conversion is an act of surrender, an opening of the city gate to let Him in. But the daughter of Jerusalem refused to be conquered by the One who loved her. That is why she would be led away captive on both levels, spiritually and physically.

In vv.5-7, Isaiah describes the siege of Jerusalem as “a day of the Lord.” The mention of Elam strongly suggests that the primary meaning of this prophecy refers to the coming of the Assyrian army to Jerusalem during the reign of Hezekiah. Sennacherib captured some of the cities in Judah and made various threats against Jerusalem. He sent a letter to Hezekiah, which the king took to the temple and spread it out before the Lord. It was Hezekiah’s attitude of prayer and repentance that averted the fall of Jerusalem at that time.<sup>3</sup>

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* explains that Elam was: “the country stretching east from the Lower Tigris, answering to what was afterward called Persia .... Later, Elam was a province of Persia .... In Sennacherib’s time Elam was subject to Assyria (2 Kings 18:11), and so furnished a contingent to its invading armies. Famed for the bow (Isa 13:18; Jer 49:35), in which the Ethiopians alone excelled them.” *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “[Elam] in Isaiah’s time was generally hostile to Assyria. Sargon, however, relates that he conquered a portion of the country, planted colonies in it from the more western parts of his empire, and placed both colonists and natives under the governor of Babylon ... It is thus quite possible that both Sargon and Sennacherib may have had a contingent of Elamites in their armies.”

King Hezekiah realized that the real protection of Jerusalem was the presence of the Lord. Like the prophet Elisha, he understood that the real protection against attack is in our relationship with God. When Elijah was taken up to heaven and Elisha watched him and cried: “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”<sup>4</sup> indicating that Elijah’s power with God was the equivalent of an army that protects the country.

Before Hezekiah’s turning to the Lord in time of need, the people of Jerusalem tried to protect Jerusalem by their own efforts. Isaiah says: “You built a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the Old Pool, but you did not look to the One who made it, or have regard for the One who planned it long ago.” After Hezekiah’s repentance, the tone of Isaiah’s prophecy changes dramatically. Isaiah sent a message to the king, stating that God had taken Sennacherib’s insults personally, and was mocking him as he fled back to his own country.<sup>5</sup>

The attitude of Jerusalem’s population is described as a celebration of despair. Not wanting to face reality, they decided to drown it in feasting and drinking. The slogan is “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!” The Apostle Paul puts Isaiah’s words in the context of the resurrection: “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’”<sup>6</sup> Problems with alcoholism are ultimately problems related to our view of death. God takes our philosophy of life and death very seriously. Even if we proclaim to believe

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3. Luke 19:41-44

1. See Jer.6:26; 8:19,21,22 etc.

2. Zech. 2:8

3. See II Kings 18:17 – 19:34.

4. II Kings 2:12

5. II Kings 19:20-28

6. I Cor. 15:32

in the resurrection, but lead a life that belies the confession of our mouth, God will hold this against us. If we believe God to be the God of the dead and not of the living, that is if we believe that death is the end of all existence, we actually blaspheme the Holy Spirit. That is the sin that, in Jesus' words, cannot be forgiven. We read in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus said: "And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."<sup>1</sup> Our life before death ought to reflect the essence of our life after death.

The words of God's revelation to Isaiah: "Till your dying day this sin will not be atoned for," are replete with deep meaning. "Your dying day" and atonement both speak of death. Atonement was made by the death of a sacrificial animal. The statement actually shows that the effect of our death is cancelled out by the death of another creature. This was foreshadowed in the Old Testament and realized in the New Testament by the death of Jesus Christ in our behalf. That is why the Apostle Paul places Isaiah's words in the context of the resurrection. Our denial of the resurrection annuls the value of the sacrifice of atonement.

In the remaining verses of this chapter, vv.15-25, Isaiah takes the theme of the previous verses and applies them to two individuals, apparently as an object lesson. The first one is Shebna and the second Eliakim. *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests that Shebna may not have been a Jew but a foreigner. We read: "The name, which is not found elsewhere, is thought to be Syriac rather than Hebrew, and Shebna himself is conjectured to have been a foreign adventurer, perhaps 'a refugee from Damascus.'" Shebna is called "steward." "This steward" is supposed to be a belittling term in the context. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "It is designedly derogatory here, suggesting a fawning, ready-to-please attitude. 'Lackey' might be a good rendering." Whoever and whatever Shebna was, he, evidently, had no low opinion about himself or his position at Hezekiah's court. He made elaborate preparations for the continuation of his fame by preparing a burial plot high upon a mountain where his body would be laid to rest and passers-by would conclude that the person buried there must have been important during his lifetime. The place Shebna chose is supposed to have been in the vicinity of the royal burial sites. The mention of Shebna's splendid chariots is indicative of the importance he assumed himself to have at Hezekiah's court. He allowed himself to go around Jerusalem in style, riding in class vehicles. Isaiah announces to this man, whom God called a disgrace to his master's house, that God would throw him away like a ball, him and his "Rolls Royce." There is no record of how this prophecy was fulfilled. Motyer suggests: "It can be assumed that one such as Shebna could have been removed off to Assyria in any one of Sennacherib's forays." *Barnes' Notes* supplies us with a Jewish legend about the end of Shebna: "The Jews say that when he left Jerusalem to deliver it into the hands of the enemy, they asked him where his army was; and when he said that they had turned back, they said, 'thou hast mocked us;' and that thereupon they bored his heels, and tied him to the tails of horses, and that thus he died." It could be that Isaiah used Shebna as a model representation of all of Judah and that his being thrown away represented the captivity all of Judah would experience.

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments on this section: "In the light of the preceding context, it is fair to assume that Shebna, the royal chamberlain, was a leader of the pro-Egypt faction in the councils of state. In the confidence that his position was secured, he had ordered a sumptuous tomb for himself, not realizing that he would be demoted from his office and die a pauper in a far country. (In 701 he was already replaced by Eliakim, according to 2 Kings 18:18, though he was still a secretary in government service.) But Eliakim (God will establish) was a truly devoted follower of God, and therefore he represents the remnant of true believers who opposed alliance with idolatrous Egypt."

The last six verses of this chapter deal with Eliakim of whom we know very little besides what is written about him during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* comments: "The office that Eliakim held has long been a subject of perplexity to commentators. The ancients, including the LXX and Jerome, understood it of the priestly office. But it is certain, from the description of the office in Isa 22, and especially from the expression in v. 22, 'I will set the key of the house of David on his

1. Matt. 12:31,32

shoulder,' that it was the king's house, and not the house of God, of which Eliakim was made prefect ... Most commentators agree that Isa 22:25 does not apply to him, but to Shebna."

There is a strong suggestion in these verses that Isaiah speaks about someone greater than Eliakim, that he was drawing a picture of the Messiah. The fact that Jesus used Isaiah's words in His address to the church in Philadelphia serves as proof. We read: "These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open."<sup>1</sup> This is reinforced by the words "he will be a seat of honor for the house of his father." The Hebrew text reads literally: "and he shall be for a glorious throne to the house of his father." The angel Gabriel used the same words when announcing the birth of Christ to His mother Mary: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David."<sup>2</sup>

*Adam Clarke's Commentary* states about the meaning of the vessels, bowls and jars that are mentioned in connection with Eliakim's glory: "One considerable part of the magnificence of the eastern princes consisted in the great quantity of gold and silver vessels which they had for various uses. 'Solomon's drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the house of the forest of Lebanon were of pure gold; none were of silver; it was nothing accounted of in Solomon's days;' 1 Kings 10:21. 'The vessels in the house of the forest of Lebanon,' the armory of Jerusalem so called, 'were two hundred targets, and three hundred shields of beaten gold.' ... These were ranged in order upon the walls of the armory, (see Song 4:4.) upon pins worked into the walls on purpose, as above mentioned. Eliakim is considered as a principal stake of this sort, immovably fastened in the wall for the support of all vessels destined for common or sacred uses; that is, as the principal support of the whole civil and ecclesiastical polity. And the consequence of his continued power will be the promotion and flourishing condition of his family and dependants, from the highest to the lowest."

The Apostle Paul speaks of vessels as an image of us as members of the church, the body of Christ. We read: "But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work."<sup>3</sup> This gives us another reason to see Eliakim as a type of Christ.

Although, as mentioned above, most Bible scholars consider v.25, which speaks about the shearing of the peg that was driven in the wall, to apply to Shebna, it is possible to see in this a prophecy about the rejection of Christ in His crucifixion.

v. Tyre: holiness to the Lord (23:1-18)

***1 An oracle concerning Tyre: Wail, O ships of Tarshish! For Tyre is destroyed and left without house or harbor. From the land of Cyprus word has come to them.***

***2 Be silent, you people of the island and you merchants of Sidon, whom the seafarers have enriched.***

***3 On the great waters came the grain of the Shihor; the harvest of the Nile was the revenue of Tyre, and she became the marketplace of the nations.***

***4 Be ashamed, O Sidon, and you, O fortress of the sea, for the sea has spoken: "I have neither been in labor nor given birth; I have neither reared sons nor brought up daughters."***

***5 When word comes to Egypt, they will be in anguish at the report from Tyre.***

***6 Cross over to Tarshish; wail, you people of the island.***

***7 Is this your city of revelry, the old, old city, whose feet have taken her to settle in far-off lands?***

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1. Rev. 3:7

2. Luke 1:32

3. II Tim. 2:20,21 (NKJV)

**8 Who planned this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants are princes, whose traders are renowned in the earth?**

**9 The LORD Almighty planned it, to bring low the pride of all glory and to humble all who are renowned on the earth.**

**10 Till your land as along the Nile, O Daughter of Tarshish, for you no longer have a harbor.**

**11 The LORD has stretched out his hand over the sea and made its kingdoms tremble. He has given an order concerning Phoenicia that her fortresses be destroyed.**

**12 He said, "No more of your reveling, O Virgin Daughter of Sidon, now crushed! "Up, cross over to Cyprus; even there you will find no rest."**

**13 Look at the land of the Babylonians, this people that is now of no account! The Assyrians have made it a place for desert creatures; they raised up their siege towers, they stripped its fortresses bare and turned it into a ruin.**

**14 Wail, you ships of Tarshish; your fortress is destroyed!**

**15 At that time Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the span of a king's life. But at the end of these seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song of the prostitute:**

**16 "Take up a harp, walk through the city, O prostitute forgotten; play the harp well, sing many a song, so that you will be remembered."**

**17 At the end of seventy years, the LORD will deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire as a prostitute and will ply her trade with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth.**

**18 Yet her profit and her earnings will be set apart for the LORD; they will not be stored up or hoarded. Her profits will go to those who live before the LORD, for abundant food and fine clothes.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, starts out by defending the title given to this section. We read: "Both elements of the title of this second pentad of oracles have proved to be true. 'Night' was reflected in the Babylonian twilight of 21:1–10, the lone voice from the darkness (21:11–12), the uncomforted trouble of the Arabian tribes (21:13–17) and Jerusalem's unforgivable sin (22:14). But there have also been flashes of 'dawn': the message of comfort to the Lord's crushed people (21:10), the invitation to enquire again because day comes (21:12), and now – surprisingly – Tyre's merchandise becomes holiness to the Lord (23:18)."

The commentary continues: "Hiram of Tyre 'always loved David' and continued his covenant and co-operation with Solomon (1 Ki. 5:1–12). But there was another side to it: Solomon was corrupted by Phoenician wives (1 Ki. 11:1–5), and the religious error he introduced remained until Isaiah's time (2 Ki. 23:13). In the northern kingdom, Tyrian Baalism made a bid to replace Yahwism in the time of Jezebel (1 Ki. 16–18). Hostility to Tyre is evident throughout the prophets (Je. 47:4; Am. 1:9–11; Joel 3:4; Ze. 9:2–4); only of Tyre does Ezekiel fail to say that they will yet know the Lord (Ezk. 25:7, 11; 30:26). Isaiah, however, makes Tyre the beacon of hope at the end of this second series of oracles, and fittingly so. Throughout the first series (13 – 20) the emphasis lay on the political upheavals of the world and the downfall of nations and states; throughout the second series (21 – 23) the emphasis rested on fallen gods (21:9) and unforgivable sin (22:14). Therefore, just as Egypt the political oppressor (Ex. 1:22) became the bearer of hope in the first series (19:24–25), so Tyre the religious corrupter becomes the hope-symbol in the second. The care that a Phoenician widow once gave to a prophet (1 Ki. 17:8–16) will be the norm of a coming relationship of holiness (23:18). The oracle is in two parts: 1–14, the fall of Tyre, 15–18, the return and renewal of Tyre."

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* gives a bird's eye view of Tyre, stating: "Tyre represents the ruthless materialism of a great commercial center. Through Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon and Tyre, it had exerted a baneful influence upon Samaria, and carried on a brisk trade in Israelite slaves (Amos 1:9). It was forced to capitulate to Assyria in 664; Nebuchadnezzar razed all but the island city in the sixth century; and Alexander completely demolished the island city in 332 BC."

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: "The lament begins (1) and ends (14) with Tyre's famous shipping lines; downfall is reported in verses 2–7, dealing in turn with Tyre (2–3), Sidon (4–5) and Tyre

again (6–7); the agencies, divine and human, behind the fall, are revealed in verses 8–13 with the same order of Tyre (8–9) Sidon (10–12b) and Tyre (12c–13). Egypt is referred to three times (3, 5, 10), further establishing a link between two oracles as above.”

Isaiah’s prophecy in this chapter evidently covers the whole Mediterranean Sea. Most Bible scholars agree that Tarshish was a place on the coast of Spain. Further places mentioned are Cyprus and Egypt. (Shihor is supposed to be a synonym for the Nile).

Isaiah, in high poetical fashion, addresses the ships of Tarshish and tells them to wail. There are three important Hebrew words in the opening verses of this section. The first word rendered “wail” is *yatal*, which actually means “to howl.” In the Old Testament, the word is particularly used by the prophets from Isaiah to Zechariah. It stands in opposition to “be silent” in v.2, which is the translation of the Hebrew *damam*, which means “to be dumb,” with a connotation of being astonished. The third word is *buwsh* meaning “to be ashamed.” The reason for this shame is barrenness. Tyre must have considered herself as being fruitful in her business. Isaiah compares her to a woman who is unable to bear children, which was considered a stigma. The lesson is that what man considers fruitful is not fruitful before God. Speaking about the topic of bearing fruit, Jesus says: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”<sup>1</sup> What we call fruit, God calls dead wood.

The prophet Ezekiel prophesied against the king of Tyre as a model of the Antichrist, as Satan himself. We read: “You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared. You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you. Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. So I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth; I made a spectacle of you before kings. By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries. So I made a fire come out from you, and it consumed you, and I reduced you to ashes on the ground in the sight of all who were watching. All the nations who knew you are appalled at you; you have come to a horrible end and will be no more.”<sup>2</sup>

The style of Isaiah’s denunciation of Tyre is similar to the lament over the fall of Babylon in Revelation. There we read: “When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry: ‘Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come!’ The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more—cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men. They will say, ‘The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.’ The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn and cry out: ‘Woe! Woe, O great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls! In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!’ Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, ‘Was there ever a city like this great city?’ They will

1. John 15:5

2. Ezek. 28:12-19

throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out: ‘Woe! Woe, O great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!’ ”<sup>1</sup>

It is to the credit of the people in the United States of America that, at the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City, the people bewailed the loss of lives, more than the loss of business. The preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has, evidently, made a difference!

Vv.6 and 7 show the refugees leaving the scene of destruction and resettling elsewhere. Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: “Tyre had no imperialist aims; she set out to make money, not conquests. This has been the central thrust of the review of Tyre (2–3), Sidon (4–5) and Tyre again (6–7): businessmen, trade, Egypt’s concern for her export market. In the matching oracle (19) Egypt represented the *power* of the world pressing upon the people of God; Tyre stands for the *ways* of the world in economic planning, commercial cupidity, and so on.”

It is good to see this chapter against the background of Ezekiel’s prophecy over the king of Tyre, because it makes us understand the relationship between human egoism and demonic influence. The Bible does not condemn trade or the accumulation of riches as such. It is the use of riches as a means to independence from God that brings us in the camp of the enemy. Jesus ended the parable of the rich fool, who decided to build bigger barns to store his wealth and retire in selfish delight, but who died that same night, with the words: “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”<sup>2</sup> The only true riches is being rich in God. Any other form of riches benefits Satan and amounts to poverty.

V.8 asks the question: “Who did this to Tyre?” The human answer is Nebuchadnezzar, or Alexander the Great. Isaiah answers: “God did this.” The fact that the destruction of Tyre is an act of God is, in itself, a blessing in disguise. It means the defeat of Satan, the actual king of Tyre, but it leaves to the people of Tyre the option of repentance of their pride.

Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, explains about vv.10-12: “*Harbor* is *mezach*, which, if it has anything to do with shipping, means ‘ship-building,’ not ‘anchorage’; but in Job 12:21 and Psalm 109:19 it means ‘belt’ and is used here metaphorically of Tyre’s grip on Tarshish. Now that Tyre’s power is broken, Tarshish can move at will. This has not required an extensive exercise of divine power, nothing but an outstretched hand (11a; cf. Ex. 14:16; 15:4–6, 12), a word of command (11c) and a voice that *said* (12a).”

About the latter part of v.12 and about v.13, the same commentary states: “Assyria began its imperial expansion in 745 BC under Tiglath Pileser. In 738 he was able to impose a military governor on Tyre, but Tyre was a restive vassal. Shalmaneser (727–722) besieged Tyre unsuccessfully and at the end of the century Tyre was still rebelling. In 701 Sennacherib devastated the mainland and did vast damage to Tyre’s trade and it was not until about 630, with the decline of Assyria, that Tyre began to revive. Yet it remained restless within the great empires, and in 586 Nebuchadnezzar opened a thirteen-year siege without ultimate success. The rock citadel withstood all attempts to take it until it fell to Alexander the Great in 332. In the light of all this there is no problem that Isaiah should be concerned with Tyre. It constituted such a power in his day it would have been strange if he had nothing to say about it. If his oracle forecasts the fall of Tyre, then this did not happen till the time of Alexander. The thrust of the oracle, however, is that Tyre’s trade has been brought to a standstill, with loss of life and people taking flight. In the light of this a reference to Assyria in verse 13 has the merit of simplicity. The devastations Sargon caused in south Mesopotamia were notorious. Seven kings from Cyprus were present at his coronation and Sargon records that when they heard what he was doing in Chaldea ‘their hearts were rent, fear fell on them.’ Isaiah could, therefore, well say *Look at the land of the Babylonians* (i.e. ‘Chaldeans’) as a warning. If the refugees wonder why they will not be received and allowed to *rest* anywhere – who would risk provoking Assyria by identifying with its foes? For thanks to Assyria’s savage attentions its people became *of no account* – maybe, even, ‘this non-

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1. Rev. 18:9-19

2. Luke 12:21

existent people,' its land become *a place for desert creatures* – the motif of the incoming beasts pointing to the end of human occupation, and its building *a ruin*.”

The last verses of this chapter, vv.15-18, describe the restoration of Tyre. Whether this is a return to former glory and importance is up for discussion. The period of seventy years seems to refer to the existence of the Babylonian empire, which lasted approximately that long. *Barnes' Notes* explains: “The expression is especially applicable to the Babylonian monarchy, because, during the entire seventy years which that kingdom lasted, it was under the dominion of one family or dynasty. Nebuchadnezzar founded the Babylonian empire, or raised it to so great splendor, that he was regarded as its founder, and was succeeded in the kingdom by his son Evil-Merodach, and his grandson Belshazzar, in whose reign the kingdom terminated; compare Jer 27:7: ‘And all nations shall serve him, and his son, and his son’s son.’ The period of seventy years is several times mentioned, as a period during which the nations that were subject to Babylon would be oppressed, and after that they should be set at liberty.”

Tyre’s description as a “prostitute forgotten” does not seem to refer to a return to glory. The trade of prostitution usually belongs to younger women. The song of a seventy-year-old prostitute evokes pity and disgust rather than glory and prosperity.

Keeping in mind that prostitution here, as in most cases in Scripture, is used in the spiritual sense of the word, as an image of a corruption in the widest sense, we are amazed at Isaiah’s statement, that the earnings will profit those who serve the Lord. In a literal sense, money earned by prostitution was unacceptable to God. We read in Deuteronomy: “You must not bring the earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the house of the LORD your God to pay any vow, because the LORD your God detests them both.”<sup>1</sup> But here, it seems to be that God and God’s people are benefiting from these returns.

The first impression we get from these verses is that Tyre did not change her character. Seventy years of oblivion did not bring any spiritual healing. The other lesson drawn from this is that Satan, the master of prostitutes, does not receive any profits in the restoration of Tyre’s trade; the profits go to the Lord. In the whole of world history, in the rise and fall of the empires, in the flourishing of corrupt trade and in all of mankind’s sinful acts, God comes out victorious and Satan is the loser.

- c. The third series: the world city and the city of God (24:1–27:13)
  - i. The city of meaninglessness (24:1–20)

**1 See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it; he will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants —**

**2 it will be the same for priest as for people, for master as for servant, for mistress as for maid, for seller as for buyer, for borrower as for lender, for debtor as for creditor.**

**3 The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered. The LORD has spoken this word.**

**4 The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the exalted of the earth languish.**

**5 The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant.**

**6 Therefore a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt. Therefore earth’s inhabitants are burned up, and very few are left.**

**7 The new wine dries up and the vine withers; all the merrymakers groan.**

**8 The gaiety of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the revelers has stopped, the joyful harp is silent.**

**9 No longer do they drink wine with a song; the beer is bitter to its drinkers.**

**10 The ruined city lies desolate; the entrance to every house is barred.**

**11 In the streets they cry out for wine; all joy turns to gloom, all gaiety is banished from the earth.**

**12 The city is left in ruins, its gate is battered to pieces.**

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1. Deut. 23:18

**13** *So will it be on the earth and among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, or as when gleanings are left after the grape harvest.*

**14** *They raise their voices, they shout for joy; from the west they acclaim the LORD's majesty.*

**15** *Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD; exalt the name of the LORD, the God of Israel, in the islands of the sea.*

**16** *From the ends of the earth we hear singing: "Glory to the Righteous One." But I said, "I waste away, I waste away! Woe to me! The treacherous betray! With treachery the treacherous betray!"*

**17** *Terror and pit and snare await you, O people of the earth.*

**18** *Whoever flees at the sound of terror will fall into a pit; whoever climbs out of the pit will be caught in a snare. The floodgates of the heavens are opened, the foundations of the earth shake.*

**19** *The earth is broken up, the earth is split asunder, the earth is thoroughly shaken.*

**20** *The earth reels like a drunkard, it sways like a hut in the wind; so heavy upon it is the guilt of its rebellion that it falls — never to rise again.*

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, suggests that Isaiah used the flood of Noah as the background of his prophecy. We read: "Both passages refer to the 'windows' of heaven (*floodgates*, 18c; Gn. 7:11) and to the *everlasting covenant* (5; Gn. 9:16); the *curse* (6) in the context of the 'vine' theme (7) looks back to Noah the vinedresser and to the post-diluvian curse (Gn. 9:20ff.). Jesus also set the scene of His return against the background of Noah's flood. We read: "As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."<sup>1</sup> He also asked the question: "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"<sup>2</sup>

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes about this chapter: "There are just two classes of mankind in view here: the wicked and corrupt society of this world; and the faithful people of God. Without distinction as to class or condition, the wrath of the Almighty is to be poured out upon all the people of the world; and all the delights of sinful pleasure will be snatched away from them. Only the smallest remnant of them (vv. 6,13) will survive the general destruction. On the other hand, there is to be a company of believers all over the world who will rejoice in this outworking of God's righteous condemnation of sin (vv. 14-16). At present, as Isaiah mournfully recognizes (v. 16b), wickedness seems to triumph and victimize the devout people of God. But a dreadful and inescapable doom awaits every citizen of earth as the world comes to a catastrophic end (v. 19). And the proud rulers of men will be cast into the prison house of Hell to await the final judgment of God (v. 22). Then will the glory of God be revealed (as Christ returns to reign on earth) in such splendor that the light of the sun and moon will pale into insignificance. Jerusalem will be the capital of Messiah's empire, and his faithful followers will bask in his radiance."

Bible scholars have debated whether Isaiah's prophecy here and in the following chapters is limited in application to Palestine alone or whether it pertains to the world as a whole. The Hebrew word *'erets* can mean "the earth at large" or "a particular country." In the creation account of Genesis it obviously means the whole earth: "In the beginning God created the heavens and *the earth*."<sup>3</sup> But in God's call to Abraham, it designates specific countries: "The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your *country*, your people and your father's household and go to the *land* I will show you.'<sup>4</sup> The "flood background" and the mention of "the islands of the sea" (v.15) strongly suggest a worldwide application.

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1. Matt. 24:37-39

2. Luke 18:8

3. Gen. 1:1

4. Gen. 12:1

Isaiah compares this apocalyptic judgment to the harvesting of an olive tree, suggesting that a small amount of olives will be left (v.13). This tiny remnant will be a nucleus of praise on earth. On the one hand the number seems to be very small, but on the other, the mention of the islands of the sea, speaks of a worldwide phenomenon.

Isaiah's change from woe to praise reminds us of John's description of the fall of Babylon in Revelation: "Woe! Woe, O great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls! In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin! Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, 'Was there ever a city like this great city?' They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out: 'Woe! Woe, O great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!' Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you."<sup>1</sup> What is eternal loss to those who rebel against God is praise for the redeemed.

In Revelation the praise continues in heaven where John testifies: "After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.' And again they shouted: 'Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.' The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried: 'Amen, Hallelujah!' Then a voice came from the throne, saying: 'Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both small and great!'"<sup>2</sup>

On earth Isaiah is torn between praise and woe. His passion for lost souls makes him cry out: "Woe to me!" (v.16). Not long before the prophet had cried out the same words when he found himself in God's holy presence and recognized his own lost condition: " 'Woe to me! ... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.' "<sup>3</sup> Only those who know they were lost and are now saved can have this compassion for their fellowmen. The Hebrew text reads literally: "My leanness, my leanness, woe to me!" We feel something of the depth of Isaiah's involvement in these words. The burden of his message to a lost humanity affected him physically and made him lose weight.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "Isaiah discovered an ambivalence in himself: longing for the fall of Babylon but finding its reality too grim to bear. It is even more so as he contemplates the End: his vital energies ebb away under the shock of what is to come. *Woe to me* (16c): as 6:5. Isaiah now feels the hopelessness of others as keenly as once he felt his own. On the one hand, the world goes carelessly on in its moral indifference, literally 'for betrayers betray; with betrayal, betrayers betray' (16d). None but Isaiah could multiply the same word like this and achieve such literary effect. It is a powerful statement of moral perversity." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* agrees: "This sentence in the Hebrew has a strange connection of uncouth sounds."

ii. Ultimately... the King! (24:21-23)

**21 And it shall come to pass in that day, that the LORD shall punish the host of the high ones that are on high, and the kings of the earth upon the earth.**

**22 And they shall be gathered together, as prisoners are gathered in the pit, and shall be shut up in the prison, and after many days shall they be visited.**

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1. Rev. 18:16-20  
 2. Rev. 19:1-5  
 3. See Isa. 6:5.

**23 Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed, when the LORD of hosts shall reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients gloriously.**

Vv.18b-23 depict another apocalyptic scene of the end of the world as we know it now under the dominion of demonic powers. The Day of the Lord is “that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below.” We find the same scene described in *The Book of Revelation* in various sections. Isaiah seems to take all of God’s judgments, past and future, together and bundle all into one. The words “The floodgates of the heavens are opened” are borrowed from the narrative of Noah’s flood: “In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, on the seventeenth day of the second month — on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.”<sup>1</sup> The prophet Joel predicted: “The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.”<sup>2</sup> And the Apostle John describes the end of the world: “I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”<sup>3</sup>

V.22 – “They will be herded together like prisoners bound in a dungeon; they will be shut up in prison and be punished after many days” can be seen as the counterpart of John’s description of the capture of Satan and his millennial imprisonment. We read: “And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.”<sup>4</sup> *The New International Version* has a footnote in v.22 at the word “punished” stating “Or released.” Actually, the Hebrew word *paqad* means “to visit, either with friendly or hostile intent.” We find it in the verse: “Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised.”<sup>5</sup> And also in “When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, ‘I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes.’”<sup>6</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, describes the scene: “Isaiah multiplies verbs of breakdown (19) and then embroiders the scene with two similes: the drunkard falls through internal loss of co-ordination; the hut is shattered by the external storm. The external factor is the hostile agency of the wrath of God (1–3); the internal factor is the heaviness of its rebellion .... The created order too is its foe (18ef), but also it is the heaviness of its own weight upon it (20c) that brings the system crashing down never to rise again.”

Some Bible scholars take these verses to have a more immediate application to Israel, Assyria and Babylon. The sun and moon are then taken to be objects of worship, which will be brought down by God’s punishment. Like all prophecy, this one may be interpreted as having more than one fulfillment, an immediate one and one at the end of time.

The Hebrew text of v.23 reads literally: “Then shall the moon be confounded and the sun be ashamed when the LORD of hosts shall reign in mount Zion, and in Jerusalem, and before his ancients gloriously.” *Barnes’ Notes* comments on this: “He would reign gloriously when his laws should be respected and obeyed; when his character as King and Ruler should be developed; and when, under his scepter, his

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1. Gen. 7:11,12
  2. Joel 2:31
  3. Rev. 6:12-14
  4. Rev. 20:1-3
  5. Gen. 21:1
  6. Isa. 10:12

kingdom should be augmented and extended. On this glad prospect the eye of the prophet was fixed; and this was the bright and splendid object in the ‘vision’ that served to relieve the darkness that was coming upon the nation. Present calamities may be borne, with the hope that Yahweh will reign more gloriously hereafter; and when the effect of all shall be such as to exalt Yahweh in the view of the nations. It may be added that when Yahweh, by the Messiah, shall reign over all the earth, all the glory of princes and monarchs shall be dimmed; the celebrity of their wisdom and power and plans shall be obscured in the superior splendor of the wisdom of God, in reigning through his Son over the human race. Come that blessed day; and speedily let the glory of the moon be confounded, and the sun be ashamed, and all inferior magnificence fade away before the splendor of the Sun of righteousness!”

Here also we find the counterpart in John’s Revelation: “Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.”<sup>1</sup>

iii. Salvation and provision: the world on Mount Zion (25:1–12)

***1 O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvelous things, things planned long ago.***

***2 You have made the city a heap of rubble, the fortified town a ruin, the foreigners’ stronghold a city no more; it will never be rebuilt.***

***3 Therefore strong peoples will honor you; cities of ruthless nations will revere you.***

***4 You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall***

***5 and like the heat of the desert. You silence the uproar of foreigners; as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is stilled.***

***6 On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine — the best of meats and the finest of wines.***

***7 On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations;***

***8 he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.***

***9 In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."***

***10 The hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain; but Moab will be trampled under him as straw is trampled down in the manure.***

***11 They will spread out their hands in it, as a swimmer spreads out his hands to swim. God will bring down their pride despite the cleverness of their hands.***

***12 He will bring down your high fortified walls and lay them low; he will bring them down to the ground, to the very dust.***

In the midst of these chapters of judgment and destruction, this chapter is like an oasis in the desert. It is good to remember that when Isaiah spoke these words none of the judgments had been executed yet. Assyria was still a threat and the Babylonian captivity was still beyond the horizon. Before the struggle begins the victory is celebrated. Before the heat has come the shade is provided. Before the famine has arrived the menu of the banquet is published. Before the tears are shed God promises to wipe them away.

Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this chapter: “This passage is made up of two sections of testimony (1–5, 9–10a) and two descriptive statements (6–8, 10b–12). As so often, Isaiah has taken pieces which originated on differing occasions in his ministry but has brought them into a telling ‘mosaic’ that perfectly fits its present context. The fallen city of 24:10 reappears (25:2–4) but with the fresh thought that is

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1. Rev. 14:1

was central to an oppressive system. There were those, here described as *poor* and *needy* (4), who, in that city, found themselves under the heel of *the strong* and *ruthless* (3), dominated by *foreigners* (5). They lived as underdogs and aliens, but this is now past. In 24:21–23 the Lord’s reign on Mount Zion was viewed in its victorious and scintillating glory; now Mount Zion is the place where *all peoples* and *nations* find abundant provision (6) and deliverance from death and sorrow (7–8). They describe this as salvation (9), and the *refuge* of which they sang (4) is his gently overshadowing hand (10a). All this reveals also how the passage meshes into the wider panorama of chapters 13 – 27. The third oracle in the first two series focused on Gentile need. In chapters 15 – 16 the chronic plight of Moab could have been met through the throne of David established in Zion (16:5), but Moab’s pride (16:6) could not swallow this loss of face and Moab resolved to go it alone. In 21:13–17, the tribes of Arabia huddle together for mutual aid, sharing the food and water that in fact solve nothing. But now (25:6) *all peoples* enjoy *the best of meats and the finest of wines* on Mount Zion. They have at last come home to where the king reigns – all of them, this is, except Moab (25:10b–12), still trying in pride to go it alone.”

As the fall of Babylon, particularly as it is celebrated in *The Book of Revelation*, represents the fall of all evil empires, actually the end of Satan’s reign, so this chapter can be seen as a blanket comfort and hope in all conditions of captivity and repression. It looks beyond the limits of time to the consummation of God’s plan with His creation. It also stands for all utterances of thanks and praise for God’s acting in behalf of mankind.

As *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “To Isaiah the “Song of Moses” seems to have been a pattern thanksgiving, from which he delighted to draw his phrases when he was bent on formally singing praise to God.” *The Commentary* gives seven examples of Isaiah’s use of the words of Moses at various places in his prophecy. Moses starts out: “I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.”<sup>1</sup> And Isaiah follows him closely with: “O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name.”

*The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* remarks about Isaiah’s outburst of praise: “There is not merely reflected glory, but reflected sound as well. The melodious echoes commence with Isa 25:1 ff. The prophet, transported to the end of the days, commemorates what he has seen in psalms and songs. These psalms and songs not only repeat what has already been predicted; but, sinking into it, and drawing out of it, they partly expand it themselves, and partly prepare the way for its further extension.”

Having looked into the faraway future and returning to the present, Isaiah bursts out in this song of praise. The first reason for this praise is the character of God. This is implied in the words “praise your name.” It is God’s perfect faithfulness that makes Him act the way He does. The words “perfect faithfulness” are the translation of a Hebrew idiom that consists of the words *‘emwnah* and *‘omen*, both words that are derived from *amen*. *‘Emwnah* is found in the verse: “He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of *truth* and without iniquity, just and right is he.”<sup>2</sup> *‘Omen* is only found once in the whole Bible in this verse in Isaiah. The use of *amen* as an affirmation of God’s character is found in Jesus’ words in the Gospels. Jesus introduced most of His statements with “I tell you the truth,” which is the translation of *amen*. In John’s Gospel the *amen* is doubled to *amen, amen*. Examples of the first use are, in Matthew’s Gospel: “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”<sup>3</sup> And in John’s Gospel: “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”<sup>4</sup> *The King James Version* is, although archaic sounding, the most correct

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1. Ex. 15:1,2
  2. Deut. 32:4 (KJV)
  3. Matt. 5:18
  4. John 1:51

with the rendering: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” John’s report of Jesus’ words is probably the most authentic.

The literal Hebrew text of v.1 reads: “O LORD you [are] my God, I will exalt you, I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful [things]; your counsels of old [are] faithfulness and truth.”

In reading this, we must remind ourselves that Isaiah’s outburst of praise came before any of these “wonderful things” had taken place historically. Isaiah had seen them with a prophetic eye. Moses and the Israelites sang their song when they saw the dead bodies of the Egyptians washing ashore, but Isaiah had nothing as proof that Assyria, Babylonia or the Antichrist would in fact be defeated. His song of praise was a song of faith.

Isaiah does not spell out the name of the city or cities that turned into a heap of rubble. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggests: “Nineveh, Babylon, Ar, Moab, or any other strong fortress possessed by the enemies of the people of God.” According to that commentary “*The Septuagint* and Chaldee read ... cities, in the plural, transposing the letters.” The threefold repetition, “city,” “fortified town,” and “stronghold” suggest more than one location. The mention of “foreigners” hints to more than merely people who were not members of the Jewish race. The Hebrew word *zuwr* literally means: “to turn aside,” but it also has the meaning of being “strange,” or “profane.” Sometimes it means: “to commit adultery.” Isaiah uses the word in the verse: “Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They *have forsaken* the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.”<sup>1</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on “the strong peoples” in v.3: “The citizens of this world city are one people though composed of many *nations*, for they are one in ideology: the ‘I can cope’ syndrome that marks a fallen race, coupled with the ‘Who needs God?’ of the self-sufficient. *Honor ... revere*: this is not a saving acknowledgment of the Lord. It is the grudging testimony of Pharaoh and his officers in Exodus 10:7, 16–17; 12:33, and the cry of those overwhelmed by the glory of the Lord Jesus in Philippians 2:9–11.”

Vv.4 and 5 again speak of the future tribulation as a thing of the past. The purpose in doing so is, of course, to furnish those who will pass through these horrors with the protection and comfort they will need in order to survive. The oppression is poetically compared to two quite different natural disasters, a hurricane and a heat wave. Those two are usually mutually exclusive. In using the two pictures to represent the same condition, Isaiah creates a sense of tension that reflects the unbearable conditions of a severe persecution. *The Pulpit Commentary* captures well the mood of these verses with the comment: “No writer accumulates striking images with such force and beauty as Isaiah. Primarily, the entire imagery has reference to what God will have done for his people when the final consummation arrives. Secondly, a precious encouragement is held out to all who are undergoing their earthly trial and probation, who are taught where to look for a sure refuge in time of trouble.”

“The ruthless” is the translation of the Hebrew word *‘ariyts* which means: “fearful,” or “tyrannical.” Survivors of a Nazi concentration camp will have had a good understanding of the kind of power Isaiah describes here.

“This mountain” in v.6 is the spiritual Mount Zion which is the one the Apostle John saw in heaven.<sup>2</sup> And the feast to which the whole world population is invited is the wedding supper of the Lamb.<sup>3</sup> The banquet is at the same time a wedding and a victory celebration. The enemy is conquered and mankind is reconciled to God. The defeated foe is not only the one outside but also the inside one. Isaiah uses two different words to describe the veil and sheet that keeps the nations from seeing what God wants them to see. The word *lowt* means “a veil,” such as worn by women. The second one, *maccekah* is of metal. The word is

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1. Isa. 1:4

2. See Rev. 14:1.

3. See Rev. 19:6-8.

usually used of the poring out metal to make an idol statue. We could say that if the first one is a veil of cloth, the second is an iron curtain.

V.8 is one of the greatest statements in the whole Bible. God “will swallow up death forever.” The Hebrew word used is *bala*. We find its first use in the verse that describes Pharaoh’s dream: “The thin heads of grain swallowed up the seven healthy, full heads.”<sup>1</sup> The Apostles Paul and John built their statements upon Isaiah’s words. Paul writes: “The last enemy to be destroyed is death”<sup>2</sup> and: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”<sup>3</sup> And John describes the end of death: “Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.”<sup>4</sup> The history of the universe will end with the death of death. That ultimate celebration will be the consummation of the victory that Jesus won when He rose from the dead.

Nothing causes such a flow of tears as death. The end of death will mean the end of all weeping. “The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces.” John repeats these words twice in Revelation.<sup>5</sup> Death is the greatest insult to our humanity. The end of death will mean our complete rehabilitation.

Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on vv.7 and 8: “Until that Day dawns, the whole world is in its shadows. We are born into it and therefore we do not recognize that what we call light is but twilight. Paul expressed it by saying ‘the night is nearly over; the day is almost here’ (Rom. 13:12), and the same thought lies behind the emphasis on the brightness (24:23) that is to come. In banishing everything that darkens life, the Lord will in particular *swallow up death for ever*. Death is not used just in the sense that every life is to some extent blighted by transience, but principally as the primary evidence of the curse imposed in consequence of sin .... In all his power (*Sovereign*) and in the fullness of his revealed nature as LORD (‘Yahweh’), God will dry the tears of his people. *From all faces, i.e.* he passes from one to another, individually, until every tear is dried ... The disgrace of living in bondage and misery under alien rule in Egypt was gone, the days of living under the cloud of the disobedience of the golden calf were over: full covenant relationships were restored. So long as we live in this world, there are innumerable ways in which we are under reproach and hindered (by circumstances as well as by sin) from living up to our true dignity as his covenant people. But, on that Day, covenant promise will be covenant reality.”

“That day” in v.9 is the Day of the Lord, the world’s last day. In contrast to the unbelief as exhibited by King Ahaz, who trusted in Assyria and Egypt for his protection, the nation of Israel will recognize that their salvation is in the LORD. Great mourning and weeping will accompany Israel’s initial reaction to this discovery. John, in Revelation, predicts: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.”<sup>6</sup> The tears wept at that time will also be wiped away by God.

Yet, reconciliation will not be complete and universal. “Moab” will choose to be excluded. We assume that Moab here is representative of all the nations and individuals who refuse God’s offer of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, remarks about this: “But there is another side. The Lord’s hand rests on his people, his foot on Moab (*trampled*). *Moab* is mentioned by name (as Tyre in 23:1) to remind that eschatology, both in blessing and bane, happens to real people. Pride excluded Moab in 16:6 and so it remains to the End. This is the ultimate tyranny of a false choice.”

“Moab” will end up in the manure pit, the place of ultimate refuge. Jesus used the image of the Gehenna, Jerusalem’s garbage dump, “where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’”<sup>7</sup> The

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1. Gen. 41:7
  2. I Cor. 15:26
  3. I Cor. 15:54
  4. Rev. 20:14
  5. See Rev. 7:17; 21:4.
  6. Rev. 1:7
  7. See Mark 9:48.

reason for their unsavory end is Moab's pride. The Hebrew word used is *ga'avah* which can either mean "majesty" or "arrogance." We find the positive use of the word in the verse: "There is no one like the God of Jeshurun, who rides on the heavens to help you and on the clouds in his *majesty*."<sup>1</sup> And the negative in: "In his *arrogance* the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises."<sup>2</sup> Moab's pride consisted in believing that God's divine majesty was theirs.

The spread out hands of the swimmer have been variously interpreted as belonging to Moab or to God. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* cites Calvin, who wrote: "Yahweh shall spread his hands to strike the foe on this side and on that, with as little effort as a swimmer spreads forth his arms to cleave a passage through the water." Others, however, believe it is Moab that desperately tries to stay afloat in the mire of manure of which it has become a part. The latter, as is born out in *The New International Version's* rendering, seems to be the more logical.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on v.12: "In verse 11b the Lord brings down the internal factor of *pride*, the attempt to be one's own salvation. Now he brings down every external edifice of security with which pride surrounds itself. Three nouns of height are matched by three verse of bringing down. *Your high fortified walls* is 'the fortified place of the top security of your walls' – and not even ruins will be left, not even rubble, just level ground, *the very dust*. Pride before a fall indeed!"

iv. The strong city (26:1–21)

***1 In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: We have a strong city; God makes salvation its walls and ramparts.***

***2 Open the gates that the righteous nation may enter, the nation that keeps faith.***

***3 You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.***

***4 Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal.***

***5 He humbles those who dwell on high, he lays the lofty city low; he levels it to the ground and casts it down to the dust.***

***6 Feet trample it down — the feet of the oppressed, the footsteps of the poor.***

***7 The path of the righteous is level; O upright One, you make the way of the righteous smooth.***

***8 Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts.***

***9 My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you. When your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness.***

***10 Though grace is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil and regard not the majesty of the LORD.***

***11 O LORD, your hand is lifted high, but they do not see it. Let them see your zeal for your people and be put to shame; let the fire reserved for your enemies consume them.***

***12 LORD, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.***

***13 O LORD, our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but your name alone do we honor.***

***14 They are now dead, they live no more; those departed spirits do not rise. You punished them and brought them to ruin; you wiped out all memory of them.***

***15 You have enlarged the nation, O LORD; you have enlarged the nation. You have gained glory for yourself; you have extended all the borders of the land.***

***16 LORD, they came to you in their distress; when you disciplined them, they could barely whisper a prayer.***

***17 As a woman with child and about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain, so were we in your presence, O LORD.***

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1. Deut. 33:26

2. Ps. 10:2

**18 We were with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to people of the world.**

**19 But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.**

**20 Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath has passed by.**

**21 See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins. The earth will disclose the blood shed upon her; she will conceal her slain no longer.**

This chapter could be called “An Ode to the City of God.” From Isaiah’s words we conclude that the prophet was not thinking of a literal city, as we know it either from ancient history or in modern times. This city of God is spiritual, it is God’s city, the one He built for us, or rather the one He built, using us as building material. It is the Jerusalem about which the Apostle Paul writes: “The Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.”<sup>1</sup>

As far back as in the early history of mankind, cities have been symbols of resistance and defense against God. The Hebrew word for city is *‘iyir*. The first time the word is used in the Bible is in connection with Cain. We read: “Cain lay with his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch.”<sup>2</sup> The second city builder was Nimrod about whom we read: “Cush was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; that is why it is said, ‘Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD.’ The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Akkad and Calneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah.”<sup>3</sup> The words “A mighty hunter before the LORD” could be interpreted as an attitude of extreme rebellion against God. There is no indication that Nimrod ever intended his empire to be to God’s glory. Nimrod’s offspring certainly built their city of Babel as a monument of rebellion. “They said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’”<sup>4</sup>

All through his prophecy, Isaiah has been pulling down such strongholds, leading the inhabitants of those cities into captivity. The walls people build to protect themselves against divine interference become their prison. It is only when “God makes salvation [our] walls and ramparts” that we become free.

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* emphasizes the importance of Judah in this context. We read: “The redeemed saints will come thronging to the gate of Jerusalem at the end of the age, chanting hymns of praise (hence the appropriateness of referring to them as Judah, for *Yehuda* means ‘Praise’).”

The city of God is the place to which those who have lost their way in life are guided. In the words of the Psalmist: “Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.”<sup>5</sup> In his description of the city, Isaiah uses the words “salvation,” “righteous,” “faith,” “perfect peace,” and “trust.” The foundation of the city is “the Rock eternal,” God Himself. The Apostle Paul says: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup> “Salvation” is the name of the city wall, indicating God’s protection over those who entrust their lives to Him. “The righteous nation,

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1. Gal. 4:26
  2. Gen. 4:17
  3. Gen. 10:8-11
  4. Gen. 11:4
  5. Ps. 107:4-7
  6. I Cor. 3:11

the nation that keeps faith” is “the Israel of God.”<sup>1</sup> That is more than Israel proper, the Jewish people; it refers to all who have put their trust in Israel’s Messiah.

We find several references to this city in *The Book of Psalms*. The Sons of Korah sang about it: “As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD Almighty, in the city of our God: God makes her secure forever. . . . Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love. Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with righteousness. Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad because of your judgments. Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation. For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.”<sup>2</sup> And: “How happy are those who can live in your house, always singing your praises . . . Happy are those who are strong in the LORD, who set their minds on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.”<sup>3</sup> Isaiah’s prophecy ultimately refers to “the bride, the wife of the Lamb,” of which the Apostle John wrote: “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”<sup>4</sup> When we enter the city of God we become the city of God.

V.3 “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you” is one of the famous verses in Isaiah. We write it on greeting cards and memorize it in Sunday school. “Perfect peace” is the translation of the Hebrew idiom *shalom shalom*. It means peace in every part of our existence. This total peace is God’s gift to those who have fixed their trust on God. The author of Hebrews calls it “an anchor for the soul.” We read: “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf.”<sup>5</sup>

Beginning with v.5 Isaiah shows us the other side of the coin: “the lofty city.” Many commentators see in this a reference to Babylon, which was the subject of earlier prophecies. Isaiah may also have had a picture of Petra in mind. *The Pulpit Commentary* believes: “The ‘world-city’ (as it has been called); *i.e.* the idealized stronghold of the adversaries of God in this world, is intended.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, writes: “If Isaiah had some particular city in mind when he first composed this poem it no longer matters. Just as 25:6 looks to the ideal – what actual Jerusalem could accommodate all nations at a banquet? – so *the lofty city* is a figure for the world organized without God.” A look at this chapter as a whole will give us the impression that the lofty city is the kingdom of death, Sheol or Hades, or whatever we may call it. And the destruction of that city comes about through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in which we may have a part.

If we keep in mind that the pulling down of the lofty city is resurrection from the dead, our trampling down the rubble and dust expresses the greatest victory celebration imaginable. It also makes v.7 a direct reference to our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the “upright One” who makes the way of the righteous smooth. He is the one about whom the author of Hebrews says: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”<sup>6</sup>

The Hebrew word for “law,” in the phrase “Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your laws,” is *mishpat*, which means “a judicial verdict,” or “a sentence.” It is the same word that is translated “judgments” in v.9. It points to God’s justice as relating to our walk through life. Our first impression in

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1. See Gal. 6:16.
  2. Ps. 48:8-14
  3. Ps. 84:4,5 (New Living Translation)
  4. Rev. 21:9,10
  5. Heb. 6:19,20
  6. Heb. 2:14,15

reading Isaiah's words may be positive, as if Isaiah sees himself as a law-abiding citizen. A deeper penetration into the meaning here will reveal what the Apostle Paul states in New Testament terms: "No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."<sup>1</sup> In walking in the way of God's law we will receive God's sentence, which is a death sentence. "For the wages of sin is death."<sup>2</sup> It is only when we learn to wait for the Lord and His Name and renown become the desire of our hearts that we learn that "the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>3</sup> God's judgments, His *mishpat* will teach the people of this world God's righteousness. Jesus made the connection between sin, judgment and righteousness when, speaking about the Holy Spirit, He said to His disciples: "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned."<sup>4</sup> God dealt with sin, judgment and righteousness on the cross.

In v.8 the prophet speaks in behalf of the people, using the plural. But in v.9 he states his personal experience of yearning for God. The Hebrew word, translated "to yearn" is '*avah* which expresses more than just a casual wish. It is an intense desire, as in the verse: "David *longed* for water and said, 'Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!'"<sup>5</sup> It is a constant longing, either in the form of lust or as a wholesome intense craving. Isaiah had received a taste of heaven and he wanted more.

In yearning to know God, Isaiah develops a passion for souls. The realization that some people will not react to God's grace and will not turn to Him for forgiveness of their sins fills him with deep sorrow. We saw earlier that the revelation of God's justice had this effect upon Isaiah. In an earlier chapter we read the prophet's exclamation: "But I said, 'I waste away, I waste away! Woe to me! The treacherous betray! With treachery the treacherous betray!' Terror and pit and snare await you, O people of the earth."<sup>6</sup> Isaiah prays for the lost that they will "be put to shame." In order to feel shame there has to be a realization of what ought to have been. If a sinner feels ashamed it means that he has received a glimpse of God's righteousness and knows to have failed. Such shame opens the way to repentance. "The fire reserved for your enemies" is not meant for human beings but for Satan and his demons. A taste of what it means to be "sinners in the hand of an angry God" may be the most wholesome experience a human being can have.

"LORD, you establish peace for us." *The King James Version* reads: "LORD, thou wilt ordain peace for us." The Hebrew word is *shaphath*, which literally means: "to put in place." We find it in the verse: "Elisha returned to Gilgal and there was a famine in that region. While the company of the prophets was meeting with him, he said to his servant, 'Put on the large pot and cook some stew for these men.'"<sup>7</sup> God puts peace in its place where it ought to be, in our soul and in our spirit.

The Hebrew text of v.12 reads literally: "LORD, you will ordain peace for us: also for all our works you have wrought in us." In these words, Isaiah touches upon one of the most profound mysteries of salvation: the relationship between God's drawing and our free will. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: "If, then, the people of the world, the unconverted, are of such impenetrable obstinacy and blindness as verses 10–11 insist, how does such an entity as the Lord's people come to exist at all? The answer is that the same Lord who (7–9) ordains their life's experiences has ordained their entrance into his peace and has done

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1. Rom. 3:20
  2. Rom. 6:23a
  3. Rom. 6:23b
  4. John 16:8-11

5. II Sam. 23:15
6. See Isa. 24:16,17.
7. II Kings 4:38

everything that is necessary to bring them there.” *The Commentary* continues: “*All that we ... is* (lit.) ‘For indeed all our works you have done for us.’ An identical piece of Hebrew in 2 Chronicles 4:6 allows us to translate ‘all our works’ as ‘whatever concerns us’ that our incomprehension, perversity and blindness of spirit can be overcome. Salvation has to be all of God.” The reference in 2 Chronicles reads: “He then made ten basins for washing and placed five on the south side and five on the north. In them the things to be used for the burnt offerings were rinsed, but the Sea was to be used by the priests for washing.”

Jesus touched upon the mystery of God’s initiative and our will when He said to the Jews: “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”<sup>1</sup> And: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.”<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Paul adds: “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”<sup>3</sup> We will probably not fully grasp the tension between the Father’s drawing and our allowing ourselves to be drawn until we enter eternity. In the meantime we may find comfort in the fact that our salvation does not depend upon the strength of our will and character.

The verses following v.12 suggest that the main topic of v.12 is not Israel’s salvation (or ours) but God’s revelation of Himself. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: “The *other lords* included Pharaoh in Egypt, the alien rulers during the time of Judges, the Philistines, and in Isaiah’s day the Assyrians, but throughout all this there was one faithful God preserving a people to keep his *name*, the truth of his self-revelation, in remembrance. Fidelity to him is his gift.”

In vv.13-15 Isaiah uses physical examples to illustrate a spiritual reality. Israel had been redeemed from slavery in Egypt and freed from the dominion of foreigners who terrorized her. But the worst slavery is inner bondage. And redemption consists of more than a population explosion and an extension of the borders of the land. The land of Canaan was not the real Promised Land, it was merely an image of it. Centuries after Israel had lived in Palestine, the author of Hebrews wrote: “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath — rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.”<sup>4</sup>

The enemy has been defeated. “The prince of this world now stands condemned.”<sup>5</sup> The ones of whom Isaiah says “They are now dead, they live no more; those departed spirits do not rise. You punished them and brought them to ruin; you wiped out all memory of them” were just the enemy’s puppets. Satan himself has been dealt the fatal blow when God revealed His righteousness in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Vv.16-18 seem to contradict the proclamation of victory in the preceding verses. When the people turned to God in their despair, nothing happened. Isaiah seems to make reference here to King Hezekiah’s words during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem, when he sent his messengers to the prophet with the message:

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1. John 6:37-40
  2. John 6:44
  3. Phil. 2:13
  4. Heb 4:1, 6-11
  5. John 16:11

“This is what Hezekiah says: This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver them.”<sup>1</sup> Or the king may have quoted the prophet’s words back to him. Here, however, it seems that the labor pains are just senseless suffering; there is no birth. “We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to people of the world” states Israel’s failure to be a kingdom of priests in this world. God had revealed Himself to Israel for the salvation of the world, but the world was not saved through them. When the Savior of the world appeared, His own people killed Him.

But mystery of mysteries, it is the death of the Savior that is the salvation of the world. Jesus’ death on the cross means the death of death itself. V.19 is the proclamation of victory. God turns out to be the God of the living, not of the dead. The foolishness of the cross is the celebration of the resurrection.

The Hebrew text of v.19 reads literally: “Your dead men shall live, together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing all you who dwell in the dust: for your dew is as the dew of the herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: The meaning of this verse is disputed, some seeing here nothing more than the resurrection of the community, but, first the (mere) continuance of the community as such does not meet the problems that the poem describes. The world has not come to new birth. The continuance of the community does nothing to solve this. Secondly, relating this passage to its parallel in verses 5–6, it is the inhabitants of the ‘lofty city’ who *dwell in the dust*. The Lord’s people already inhabit the city of salvation (1). It is others who need to be drawn in. In this connection *your dead* is more likely to mean ‘the dead you are concerned about’ and this is then capped by the Lord’s claim upon them as (lit.) ‘my corpses’ (not as NIV), *i.e.* ‘the dead I am concerned with.’ It is, then, a promise of life for the world: the counterpart of the vision of 25:6–10a. But 25:7–8 looked forward specifically to the abolition of death itself. If we view 26:19 in its context in this way (as indeed we must), then its terms go beyond any figurative significance to the literal sense of a full resurrection.”

The fact that v.19 poses problems of interpretation is illustrated in the rather vast difference in translations. *The New King James Version* seems to stay closest to the Hebrew text with: “Your dead shall live; Together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; For your dew is like the dew of herbs, And the earth shall cast out the dead.” *The New Living Translation* takes more liberty with: “Yet we have this assurance: Those who belong to God will live; their bodies will rise again! Those who sleep in the earth will rise up and sing for joy! For God’s light of life will fall like dew on his people in the place of the dead!”

It has been observed that this chapter begins with an open gate (v.2) and it ends with a closed door. Before the great day of resurrection dawns, God will pass judgment upon this world and hold it accountable for the blood that was shed upon it. Death entered this world by the disobedience of one man.<sup>2</sup> But after death came in, disobedience led to murder. God said to Cain: “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.”<sup>3</sup> The amount of blood that has soaked our planet is beyond calculation. God demands an account of every drop of it. Before the earth will “cast out the dead” it will reveal the blood that was spilled upon it. It is upon this continuous act of mass murder that God will reveal His wrath and take vengeance.

V.20 states that God’s wrath will “pass by.” The Hebrew word used is *abar*, which literally means “to cross over.” The same word is used in the context of the first Passover in Egypt: “On that same night I will *pass through* Egypt and strike down every firstborn — both men and animals — and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD.”<sup>4</sup> On that night the Israelites were told to enter into their

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1. See Isa. 37:3 ff.

2. See Rom. 5:12ff.

3. Gen. 4:10,11

4. Ex. 12:12

houses and shut the door. The angel of death passed by the houses that were marked by the blood of the Passover lamb.

There is a sense in which this Passover takes place in the life of every believer in Jesus Christ and His death on the cross. Our lives have been marked by the blood of the Lamb, which protects us from God's wrath upon our sin. But what happens to the individual will also happen to the world as a whole. Those who live in the city of salvation live behind closed doors. We, who believe, have crossed over. In Jesus' words: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."<sup>1</sup>

v. The universal Israel (27:1–13)

***1 In that day, the LORD will punish with his sword, his fierce, great and powerful sword, Leviathan the gliding serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent; he will slay the monster of the sea.***

***2 In that day — "Sing about a fruitful vineyard:***

***3 I, the LORD, watch over it; I water it continually. I guard it day and night so that no one may harm it.***

***4 I am not angry. If only there were briars and thorns confronting me! I would march against them in battle; I would set them all on fire.***

***5 Or else let them come to me for refuge; let them make peace with me, yes, let them make peace with me."***

***6 In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit.***

***7 Has [the LORD] struck her as he struck down those who struck her? Has she been killed as those were killed who killed her?***

***8 By warfare and exile you contend with her — with his fierce blast he drives her out, as on a day the east wind blows.***

***9 By this, then, will Jacob's guilt be atoned for, and this will be the full fruitage of the removal of his sin: When he makes all the altar stones to be like chalk stones crushed to pieces, no Asherah poles or incense altars will be left standing.***

***10 The fortified city stands desolate, an abandoned settlement, forsaken like the desert; there the calves graze, there they lie down; they strip its branches bare.***

***11 When its twigs are dry, they are broken off and women come and make fires with them. For this is a people without understanding; so their Maker has no compassion on them, and their Creator shows them no favor.***

***12 In that day the LORD will thresh from the flowing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you, O Israelites, will be gathered up one by one.***

***13 And in that day a great trumpet will sound. Those who were perishing in Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.***

In his introduction to this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, writes: "With this passage we reach the conclusion of Isaiah's panorama of history .... With the Isaiah Cantata (chs. 24 – 27) this is the denouement: in 26:20–21 the believing people, though within the city of salvation, were waiting for the final coming of the Lord in judgment. This is now envisaged. 27:1–13 consists of a central passage (7–11), dealing with past forbearance (7–8), coming atonement (9) and ultimate overthrow (10–11). On each side of it there are two 'in that day' sections (1 and 2–6; 12 and 13). These match each other: the Lord's victory in the heavenlies (1) and the Lord's jubilee on earth (13); the vineyard people (2–6) and the harvest people (12). Thus (exactly as 14:1–2 is central to 13:1 – 14:27 in the opening oracle of the series) the Lord's plans for his people lie at the center of his cosmic, eschatological work."

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1. John 5:24

This may be the best place in Scripture to take a closer look at “the leviathan.” Most Bible scholars agree that, at least in some instances, the leviathan refers to the Egyptian crocodile. In Job, for instance, the description of the leviathan in chapter 41 best fits that animal. But in another text in Job, Job seems to refer to a spiritualist séance, when he said: “May those who curse days curse that day, those who are ready to rouse Leviathan.”<sup>1</sup> The leviathan is mentioned twice in Psalms,<sup>2</sup> where the reference seems to be to some sea monster. Some Bible scholars believe that leviathan is identical to behemoth. In Job, the description seems to fit the hippopotamus, which was also found in Egypt.<sup>3</sup> *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggests that the terms “are used allegorically, without doubt for great potentates, enemies and persecutors of the people of God: but to specify the particular persons or states designed by the prophet under these images, is a matter of great difficulty.” According to *Barnes’ Notes*, *The Septuagint* renders “leviathan” in the text in Isaiah “the dragon.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “Leviathan [is] a symbolic creature (reflected in the dragon myths of the pagan Semites), representing the arrogant, turbulent world in revolt against God. More particularly it stands for the successive world empires of Egypt, Assyria (associated with the swift-running Tigris), and Babylon (associated with the winding Euphrates).” In his book *Worlds in Collision*, Emanuel Veliskovsky proposes that the mythological Leviathan finds its origin in certain phenomena that occurred in the sky when Venus entered our solar system as a comet, the tail of which swept over our planet and produced dragon-like fires in the sky. None of the above suggestions can be substantiated, but it seems from the biblical use of the name “Leviathan” that more than to a certain animal, worldly or demonic powers are being referred to. As the eagle is symbolic for The United States of America so the crocodile may have been Egypt’s mascot and in that context it can be taken as a power that opposes the power of God. As in the first Passover, God passed “judgment on all the gods of Egypt.”<sup>4</sup>

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “The crowning judgment of all is now briefly described. ‘In that day’ — the day of God’s vengeance — when all his other enemies have been put down, Jehovah shall finally visit with his sword three mighty foes, which are described under three figures — the first as ‘Leviathan, the swift serpent;’ the second as ‘Leviathan, the crooked serpent;’ and the third as ‘the dragon that is in the sea.’ It has been usual to see in these three monsters three kingdoms inimical to God — either Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt; or Assyria, Egypt, and Tyre; or Media, Persia, and Egypt. But this diversity of interpretation shows that there is no particular fitness in the emblems to symbolize any special kingdoms or world-powers, while the imagery itself and the law of climax alike point to something higher than world-powers being intended.”

In v.1 of this chapter, “Leviathan” is probably Satan, who is called “that ancient serpent” in *The Book of Revelation*.<sup>5</sup> The first “in that day” probably refers to “the last day,” the Day of Judgment, the day of the Lord when Satan’s power and influence will be defeated completely. It is the day to which Jesus refers in the sixth chapter of John, the day on which He will raise the dead.<sup>6</sup>

In vv.2-5 it is the day of reconciliation. This reconciliation is given in the form of a song of the vineyard. This is the second time Isaiah gives us a vineyard song. In chapter five Israel is also depicted as a vineyard, but there the people are judged for ruining the Lord’s garden. Here the Lord restores the picture to what it is supposed to be: a vineyard that produces the wine of joy for the whole world. The image ties in naturally with Jesus’ words about Himself as the vine and us as the branches: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit,

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1. See Job 3:8.
  2. Ps. 74:14; 104:26
  3. Job 40:15
  4. See Ex. 12:12.
  5. See Rev. 20:2.
  6. See John 6:39,40,44,54.

showing yourselves to be my disciples.”<sup>1</sup> In Isaiah’s text the topic is actually God more than the vineyard. The song depicts God’s loving care for His people and issues an invitation to those who are represented under the image of briars and thorns to come and be reconciled to Him. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, explains: “*In days to come* may be a correct interpretation of ‘the coming ones.’ But as an exclamation, ‘They are coming!’, it might refer to those responding to the invitation of verse 5.”

According to *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, *The Septuagint* and *Syriac* read, instead of the Hebrew word *cheemaah*, “anger,” *chowmah*, “wall.” This would allow the verse to read: “I have no wall,” as if the vineyard were complaining about a lack of protection. *The Commentary* states: “The vineyard wishes for a wall and a fence of thorns-human strength and protection, (as the Jews were too apt to apply to their powerful neighbors for assistance, and to trust to the shadow of Egypt:) YAHWEH replies, that this would not avail her, nor defend her against his wrath. He counsels her, therefore, to betake herself to his protection. On which she entreats him to make peace with her.” This interpretation would turn the song into a dialogue between God and His vineyard.

In the light of Jesus’ use of the picture of the vine and the branches we could see in v.6 the promise of the whole world being reached with the Gospel message. “Israel” is then more than just the Jewish nation, as we know it; it is “the Israel of God.”<sup>2</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on v.7: “The Hebrew in verse 7 is rhythmic and beautiful but at the expense of clarity! ‘Like the smiting of the one who smote him did he smite him?’, *i.e.* did the Lord smite Israel to the same extent as he smote Israel’s smiters? The second question is much the same: ‘or like the slaughter of his slaughtered one was he slaughtered?’, *i.e.* did Israel ever suffer such casualties as the Lord inflicted on those he defeated.” The Hebrew word rendered “By warfare” is only found in this verse in the Bible and its meaning is unclear.

V.9 does not ease up the difficulties of interpretation. The theme is obviously atonement which leads to the removal of sin. The Hebrew word translated “atoned for” is *kaphar*, which means “to cover.” It is the Old Testament mode of atonement in which sin was covered by the blood of a sacrificial animal. It is not identical to the removal of sin as in the New Testament sense where sin is expiated by the blood of Christ. In this verse, however, sin that is covered is also removed. The Hebrew word *cuwr* literally means “to turn off,” or “remove.” This amounts to a prophecy about the efficacy of the blood of Christ as opposed to the effectiveness of animal sacrifices.

Bible scholars differ about the meaning of Isaiah’s words. Some see in the mention of the altar stones a representation of true religion, whereas the “Asherah poles” stand for idolatry. That Asherah represents idolatry can hardly be argued. But in idolatry we find the pole of Asherah next to the altar for Baal. It seems more consistent to take both to be elements of false religion from which Israel was to be purged. *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “This verse states the whole design of the punishment of the Jews. They were taken away from their temple, their city, and their land; they were removed from the groves and altars of idolatry by which they had been so often led into sin; and the design was to preserve them henceforward from relapsing into their accustomed idolatry.”

Another point of scholarly contention is “the fortified city” in v.10. Some Bible scholars take this to be “the world city,” Babylon, the mother of prostitutes; others believe Jerusalem is meant here, after its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. The latter seems to be more consistent with the general theme of the chapter. The Babylonian captivity did serve to eradicate Israel’s idolatry once for all. Isaiah makes abundantly clear that the Israel of his time was devoid of understanding.

Depending on what designation is given to “the fortified city,” the “people without understanding” are identified. Jerusalem does not really seem to fit the picture. It was about Babylon that Isaiah prophesied earlier: “She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherd will rest his flocks there. But desert creatures will lie there, jackals will fill her houses; there the

1. John 15:1, 5, 8

2. See Gal. 6:16.

owls will dwell, and there the wild goats will leap about. Hyenas will howl in her strongholds, jackals in her luxurious palaces. Her time is at hand, and her days will not be prolonged.”<sup>1</sup> The words “a people without understanding” could apply either to the people of Judah or to the Babylonians. There seems, however, to be a suggestion in these words that they ought to have understood what the Lord had in mind but they did not. This then would apply to the Judeans rather than to the Babylonians. As with the coming of the Messiah, the most amazing reaction was of those who ought to have understood. “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”<sup>2</sup>

The last two verses of this chapter describe what has been called “The jubilee harvest.” As J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes, “the flowing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt” describes the boundaries of the land God promised to Israel. We read in Exodus: “I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the River. I will hand over to you the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before you.”<sup>3</sup> Motyer further states: “The fiftieth (Jubilee) year (Lv. 25:8ff.) followed the forty-ninth (sabbatical) year and was, therefore, a year for which there was no harvest in preparation. Thus it was a year of total dependence on the Lord. As in 25:6–10a, in that day the Lord will supply everything (55:1–2; Lk.14:17). The Jubilee trumpet was sounded on the Day of Atonement (Lv. 25:9), linking with the atonement in v.9.”

The Israelites must have understood Isaiah’s reference to the sounding of the great trumpet as being to the Year of Jubilee. It was the year in which all debts were cancelled and all sold property, that is all allotted parts of the land, were restored to the original owner. Slaves were freed and families rehabilitated. There is no record in Scripture that Israel ever obeyed this law. The closest the Jews came to its observation was during the last sieges of Jerusalem, when general abolition of slavery was announced but withdrawn immediately when the tension eased.<sup>4</sup> The connection between the Year of Jubilee and the Day of Atonement is clear, since the celebration started at the end of that day with the blowing of the trumpet.

In Isaiah’s text, indebtedness and slavery is equated with captivity, both Assyrian, Babylonian and other, even connecting it to the original exodus from Egypt. God promises to restore His people to the Promised Land, to make them enter into His rest, on the basis of the atonement of their sins. The New Testament puts this prophecy in a much larger context. The real slavery is slavery to sin. The author of Hebrew says of this: “Since the children have flesh and blood, [Jesus] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”<sup>5</sup> God brings us back from our captivity by the resurrection of Jesus Christ in our behalf. The Apostle Paul states: “For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” God’s great trumpet will sound for us!

#### IV. THE LORD OF HISTORY (28 – 37)

##### a. The six woes (28:1–35:10)

##### i. The first woe: the word of God and the purposes of God (28:1–29)

***1 Woe to that wreath, the pride of Ephraim’s drunkards, to the fading flower, his glorious beauty, set on the head of a fertile valley — to that city, the pride of those laid low by wine!***

***2 See, the Lord has one who is powerful and strong. Like a hailstorm and a destructive wind, like a driving rain and a flooding downpour, he will throw it forcefully to the ground.***

***3 That wreath, the pride of Ephraim’s drunkards, will be trampled underfoot.***

1. Isa. 13:20-22
2. John 1:10,11
3. Ex. 23:31
4. See Jer. 34:8-11.
5. Heb. 2:14,15

*4 That fading flower, his glorious beauty, set on the head of a fertile valley, will be like a fig ripe before harvest — as soon as someone sees it and takes it in his hand, he swallows it.*

*5 In that day the LORD Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of his people.*

*6 He will be a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, a source of strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.*

*7 And these also stagger from wine and reel from beer: Priests and prophets stagger from beer and are befuddled with wine; they reel from beer, they stagger when seeing visions, they stumble when rendering decisions.*

*8 All the tables are covered with vomit and there is not a spot without filth.*

*9 "Who is it he is trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast?"*

*10 For it is: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there."*

*11 Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people,*

*12 to whom he said, "This is the resting place, let the weary rest"; and, "This is the place of repose" — but they would not listen.*

*13 So then, the word of the LORD to them will become: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there — so that they will go and fall backward, be injured and snared and captured.*

*14 Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers who rule this people in Jerusalem.*

*15 You boast, "We have entered into a covenant with death, with the grave we have made an agreement. When an overwhelming scourge sweeps by, it cannot touch us, for we have made a lie our refuge and falsehood our hiding place."*

*16 So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.*

*17 I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line; hail will sweep away your refuge, the lie, and water will overflow your hiding place.*

*18 Your covenant with death will be annulled; your agreement with the grave will not stand. When the overwhelming scourge sweeps by, you will be beaten down by it.*

*19 As often as it comes it will carry you away; morning after morning, by day and by night, it will sweep through." The understanding of this message will bring sheer terror.*

*20 The bed is too short to stretch out on, the blanket too narrow to wrap around you.*

*21 The LORD will rise up as he did at Mount Perazim, he will rouse himself as in the Valley of Gibeon — to do his work, his strange work, and perform his task, his alien task.*

*22 Now stop your mocking, or your chains will become heavier; the Lord, the LORD Almighty, has told me of the destruction decreed against the whole land.*

*23 Listen and hear my voice; pay attention and hear what I say.*

*24 When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually? Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil?*

*25 When he has leveled the surface, does he not sow caraway and scatter cummin? Does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field?*

*26 His God instructs him and teaches him the right way.*

*27 Caraway is not threshed with a sledge, nor is a cartwheel rolled over cummin; caraway is beaten out with a rod, and cummin with a stick.*

*28 Grain must be ground to make bread; so one does not go on threshing it forever. Though he drives the wheels of his threshing cart over it, his horses do not grind it.*

*29 All this also comes from the LORD Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.*

In introducing these chapters, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "The reference to Israel, Egypt and Assyria in 27:12–13 forms the bridge into this new section, which reflects a period of history in which these

three powers tangled with each other – a period, that is to say, which offered a test case of the Lord’s rule in history and specifically over the three powers Isaiah has used as eschatological symbols. The occasion was the ‘Egyptian Alliance’ ... in the days of Hezekiah. Assyria was overlord; Hezekiah a puppet ‘king’ under Assyria; Merodach-Baladan, the ever-restless king and would-be king of Babylon, was canvassing an alliance with the western Palestinian states; and Egypt was covenanting intervention once the flag of rebellion was raised. In chapters 38 – 39 Isaiah will diagnose this as an issue of faith, and he does not ignore that great question here, for it was his task to oppose Hezekiah’s lunatic fascination with militarist solutions by asserting the alternative course of trusting God’s promises. But in the main in these chapters, the issue of faith is in the background, and he takes us through the events in order to reveal where power really lies, that is to say, in the sovereign Lord.”

Isaiah’s prophecy in vv.1-6 is obviously about the northern kingdom of Israel. Whether “the wreath” or “crown” refers to Israel’s last king, Hoshea, or to the city of Samaria, or to the country as a whole is not clear. The Hebrew word *‘atarah* comes from a verb meaning “to wrap around.” It can mean either “a crown,” or “a wreath.” In most cases in the Old Testament it means a crown as worn by a king, as in: “He took the crown from the head of their king-its weight was a talent of gold, and it was set with precious stones — and it was placed on David’s head.”<sup>1</sup> So the word could apply to Israel’s last king Hoshea. Most Bible scholars, however, believe that the “wreath, the pride of Ephraim’s drunkards” is a Hebrew idiom referring to the city of Samaria. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* states: “The city, beautifully situated on the top of a round hill, and surrounded immediately with a rich valley and a circle of other hills beyond it, suggested the idea of a chaplet or wreath of flowers worn upon their heads on occasions of festivity, expressed by the proud crown and the fading flower of the drunkards.”

The most condemnatory prophecy about Samaria and its inhabitants is found in Amos. Amos said: “You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile; your feasting and lounging will end.”<sup>2</sup>

The fall of Samaria, which may not have occurred yet when Isaiah pronounced this prophecy, is given as an object lesson to Judah. Samaria considered itself invincible. King Omri purchased the hill of Shemer for two talents of silver and built the city, making it the capital of the northern kingdom.<sup>3</sup> It took the Assyrians three years of siege to capture the city.<sup>4</sup>

Isaiah’s description of Israel’s drunkenness was probably a picture of a real condition, but it became symbolic of all human resistance and indifference toward God. The portrayal of the result of inebriation, the vomit and hangover, is representative of a physical and a spiritual condition. It reminds us of Paul’s warning: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.”<sup>5</sup>

In v.2: “See, the Lord has one who is powerful and strong” the words “has” and “who is” are not in the original text. *Young’s Literal Translation* renders it: “Lo, a mighty and strong one [is] to the Lord.” The power of human resistance is contrasted with Almighty God. As was mentioned, the city Samaria was considered impregnable and on the human level it took years of siege to conquer it. But its human defenses turned out to be no match for God’s omnipotence. Speaking about the Antichrist, the Apostle Paul writes: “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.”<sup>6</sup> God’s breath which made Adam into a living being also

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1. II Sam. 12:30
  2. Amos 6:4-7
  3. See I Kings 16:24.
  4. II Kings 18:9,10
  5. Eph. 5:18
  6. II Thess. 2:8

has tornado strength which is more than sufficient to blow away all human and diabolic resistance. Isaiah uses two pictures, one of strength and one of ease to illustrate his point. God's breath is strong enough to blow away the whole universe and He does this with the same ease as someone who picks a ripe olive of a tree and sticks it in his mouth: it takes no effort.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on vv.5 and 6: "Often in Isaiah hope comes as a surprise. No sooner has Samaria disappeared, been submerged (2) and swallowed (4) by judgment, than a *day* is envisaged when it will be transformed. Here is another principle at work: the Lord brings just judgments (1–4) but never rewrites his promises (5–6). The words *crown, glorious, beautiful* are the same as in verse 1 but here linked with the Lord. He will, in and through himself, undo all that sin has done . . . . The implication is the reversal of the schism (1 Ki.12) between the two kingdoms and the restoration of the throne of David. Secondly, there will be security."

As the imagined glory of sinful Samaria would be destroyed, so the presence of the Lord will be genuine glory to those who have put their trust in God. Two categories of survivors are mentioned: judges and soldiers. God will restore the power of judgment to the former and relief from battle fatigue to the latter. But much more is implied in vv.5 and 6 than restoration of human abilities and energy. "The LORD Almighty will be a glorious crown, a beautiful wreath for the remnant of his people." God will not only give us a crown, He will be our crown. We read about the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb: "It shone with the glory of God."<sup>1</sup> In heaven we will fill eternity by giving back to God the glory He gives to us. John describes this for us, saying: "Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'"<sup>2</sup>

In sharp contrast to this heavenly glory, this "inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you,"<sup>3</sup> stands Isaiah's picture of the hangover in which sin leaves the human race. Instead of the fullness of the Holy Spirit, the human race gets drunk on wine and beer, leaving tables covered with vomit and filth. A clearer picture of the disgust sin leaves us with can hardly be imagined. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on vv.7 and 8: "The verses read as if Isaiah were watching an actual scene — and the Hebrew he writes itself captures the lurching, staggering — and vomiting — of revelers. Had the ambassadors of 30:1ff. returned, waving their piece of paper, gleeful over the Egyptian Alliance (see 18), and is this the celebratory state banquet? Even the official organs of the word of God have succumbed. *Prophets* were immediate mediators of divine revelation (*visions*); *priests* applied this truth to people's lives in their decisions (Mal. 2:5–7), but what they are in private (7cde) they are in ministry (7fg). Bodily indulgence saps spiritual perception. Befuddled is 'swallowed up' (see 4). They thought they were doing the swallowing!" The quotation from Malachi reads: "My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction — because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty."

The question that has occupied the mind of Bible scholars regarding verses 9 and following is "Who is speaking?" As is to be expected, the wise are divided in their opinions. Some believe it is Isaiah who addresses the drunkards behind the filthy tables, but others consider the speakers to be the drunken priests and prophets. *Barnes' Notes* observes: "According to this interpretation, the prophet speaks of them as deriders of the manner in which God had spoken to them by his messengers. 'What!' say they, 'does God treat us as children? Does he deal with us as we deal with infants just weaned, perpetually repeating and

1. Rev. 21:11
2. Rev. 4:9-11
3. See I Peter 1:4.

inculcating the same elementary lessons, and teaching the mere rudiments of knowledge?’ The expression, therefore, ‘whom shall he teach knowledge?’ or, ‘whom does he teach?’ is an expression of contempt supposed to be spoken by the intemperate priests and prophets—the leaders of the people. ‘Whom does God take us to be? Does he regard us as mere children? Why are we treated as children with an endless repetition of the same elementary instruction?’ ”

*The Pulpit Commentary* adds: “The best explanation seems to be that suggested by Jerome, and followed by Bishop Lowth and most commentators, viz. that the prophet dramatically introduces his adversaries as replying to him with taunting speeches. ‘Whom does he think he is teaching?’ they ask. ‘Mere children, just weaned from their mother’s milk, and taken away from the breast? Does he forget that we are grown men — nay, priests and prophets? And what poor teaching it is! What ‘endless petty teasings’! (Delitzsch) — precept upon precept,’ etc. The intention is to throw ridicule upon the smallness and vexatious character of the prophet’s interminable and uninterrupted chidings (Delitzsch).”

The latter interpretation seems to be the better considering the arrogance with which most drunkards deem themselves to be superior to their surrounding. Alcohol gives to a person a feeling of significance that is way out of proportion to his actual worth and condition. Vomit and filth does not seem to bother those who are drunk with wine and beer. Instead of seeing the law of God as an expression of His character, they see it as a set of rudimentary rules they have outgrown.

Isaiah’s answer is that God will speak to those who believe His Word to be “child’s talk” in a language they will not understand. Undoubtedly this is a reference to the coming Babylonian captivity. According to the Greeks, the Babylonians babble! That seems to be the origin of their name. The problem for the sophisticated inhabitants of Jerusalem would be that those babblers would give orders that must be obeyed. God’s Word would come to them in the form of orders given in a foreign language that demand obedience on threat of death.

In sharp contrast to the harshness of captivity stands God’s original intent for the people of Israel to enter into God’s rest in His Promised Land. They did enter the land but never rested in it.

In spite of Alec J. Motyer’s supposition that Judah’s “covenant with death” refers to their alliance with Egypt, it seems to refer to a pact with the devil more than to any human agreement. When Adolf Hitler invaded Soviet Russia in 1941, Winston Churchill decided to enter into a treaty with Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator. To some who doubted the wisdom of this, Churchill answered that he would even make a pact with the devil himself if that would win the war for Great Britain. Maybe he did!

The words in v.15 are, of course, not what the leaders of Judah were saying; they are what the pact means: it is an agreement with death and Satan for the purpose of staying alive.

As *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Isaiah now turns from a denunciation of the priests and prophets, who especially opposed his teaching, to a threatening of the great men who guided the course of public affairs. He taxes them with being ‘men of scorn’ (ver. 14), *i.e.* scorners of Jehovah, and with ‘a proud and insolent self-confidence’ (Delitzsch). They have made, or are about to make, secret arrangements which will, they believe, secure Judea against suffering injury at the hands of the Assyrians, and are quite satisfied with what they have done, and fear no evil. Isaiah is instructed that their boasted arrangements will entirely fail in the time of trial — their ‘refuge’ (Egypt) will be found a refuge of lies (ver. 17), and the ‘overflowing scourge’ (Assyria) will pass through the land, and carry all before it (ver. 18). There will then ensue a time of ‘vexation’ and discomfort (vers. 19, 20) — God’s anger will be poured out upon the land in strange ways (ver. 21). He therefore warns the rulers to lay aside their scorn of God, and humble themselves, lest a worse thing happen to them (ver. 22).” The lie was not only in Egypt, it was in their own heart also.

In vv.16 and 17 the pendulum swings again to the other side, from wrath to grace, from judgment to salvation. *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* makes the following modifying comment: “The ... ‘therefore,’ which is resumed in v. 16, is apparently followed as strangely as in Isa 7:14, by a promise instead of a threat. But this is only apparently the case. It is unquestionably a promise; but as the last clause, ‘he that believeth will not flee,’ *i.e.*, will stand firm, clearly indicates, it is a promise for believers alone. For those to whom the prophet is speaking here the promise is a threat, a savor of death unto death. Just as on a

former occasion, when Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, the prophet announced to him a sign of Jehovah's own selection; so here Jehovah opposes to the false ground of confidence on which the leaders relied, the foundation stone laid in Zion, which would bear the believing in immovable safety, but on which the unbelieving would be broken to pieces (Matt 21:44). This stone is called 'ebhen boochan, a stone of proving, i.e., a proved and self-proving stone.' The reference from Matthew reads: "He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."

Bible scholars have given various interpretations to "the stone" in v.16. According to J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, "The stone could be the Lord himself, who chose and came to dwell in Zion (8:14); or it could be the Davidic throne as the focus of the promises (Pss. 2:6; 118:22); or we could translate 'a stone, namely Zion': the chosen city as the repository of the presence and promises of God. But the essential idea remains the same: promises have been made and the Lord's people are invited to build their lives on them."

The New Testament leaves little room for doubt as to the meaning of this stone. Immediately following *the Parable of the Tenants and the Vineyard*, Jesus speaks about the stone, quoting from the psalms: "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'?" Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."<sup>1</sup>

The Apostles Paul and Peter both quote Isaiah's words. Paul writes: "As it is written: 'See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'"<sup>2</sup> And: "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone."<sup>3</sup> Peter writes: "For in Scripture it says: 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.' Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,' and, 'A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the message — which is also what they were destined for."<sup>4</sup>

From another one of Paul's quotations we may assume that, in Isaiah also, the "cornerstone for a sure foundation" is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. We read in *First Corinthians*: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

The reading in *The New International Version*, "the one who trusts will never be dismayed" is based on *The Septuagint*. The older versions, as represented by *The New King James Version*, read: "Whoever believes will not act hastily." The Hebrew word *chuwsh* literally means "to hurry." *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: "The LXX. have 'He that believeth shall not be *ashamed*' or 'confounded;' and St. Paul (... Romans 9:33) follows this rendering. It is conjectured that the Hebrew had originally *yabish* instead of *yakhish*." In other places in Isaiah the Hebrew word *chuwsh* is consistently used in the sense of "hurry." "Let God hurry, let him *hasten* his work so we may see it. Let it approach, let the plan of the Holy One of Israel come, so we may know it."<sup>6</sup> And "The least of you will become a thousand, the smallest a mighty nation. I am the LORD; in its time I will *do this swiftly*."<sup>7</sup>

Now back to the intent of v.16! If Jesus Christ, the cornerstone, is the tested foundation, it means that He puts us to the test because He is risen from the dead. From the context of Psalm 118, we understand

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1. Matt. 21:42-44
  2. Rom. 9:33. This and the following verses are based on *The Septuagint*.
  3. Eph. 2:19,20
  4. I Peter 2:6-8
  5. I Cor. 3:11
  6. Isa. 5:19
  7. Isa. 60:22

that God lays the foundation by means of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The words “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it”<sup>1</sup> refer to the crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus’ victory over death is God’s measuring stick for the judgment of our life. It is because we are a new creation in Jesus Christ that justice and righteousness will prevail in us.

Jesus put all this in perspective by using Isaiah’s text as the model for His concluding remarks in His *Sermon on the Mount*. Isaiah says: “Hail will sweep away your refuge, the lie, and water will overflow your hiding place.” And Jesus says: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”<sup>2</sup> *The Sermon on the Mount* is for us God’s measuring line of justice and God’s plumb line of righteousness.

Vv.18 and 19 have an obvious negative content in the context in which Isaiah places them, but there is also another, a positive way to look at these words. The “covenant of death” may originally apply to Judah’s pact with Egypt, but there is a sense in which we all have made a covenant with death. Because of the presence of a sinful nature in all of us we are all headed for the grave. The contract may be one of slavery, but that does not make it less binding. When God’s justice and righteousness come in as a hailstorm that sweeps away our hiding place of lies and deceit, death will be swallowed up in victory. In Isaiah’s mind the Assyrians and Babylonians would come in and gobble up Judah, pact and all. But the Holy Spirit allows us to read another meaning in these words so that the message will not bring about sheer terror.

In order to illustrate his point, the prophet shows us a man who tries to sleep on a bed under a blanket. Both bed and blanket are too short. This is the Old Testament version of the proverb “You made your bed, now lie on it.” In the Hebrew, the verse reads: “For the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself [on it] and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself [in it].” “Than that a man can stretch himself” is one single verb in Hebrew, as is “than that he can wrap himself.” If we try to picture this sleeper’s unsuccessful struggle we understand how ridiculous our human efforts must seem to God. Had Judah put her trust in God instead of in Egypt, they would have rested peacefully.

*Barnes’ Notes* comments on this verse: “This is evidently a proverbial saying, and means that they would find all their places of defense insufficient to secure them. They seek repose and security-as a man lies down to rest at night. But they find neither. His bed furnishes no rest; his scanty covering furnishes no security from the chills of the night. So it would be with those who sought protection in idols, in the promises of false prophets, and in the aid which might be obtained from Egypt. So it is with sinners. Their vain refuges shall not shield them. The bed on which they seek rest shall give them no repose; the covering with which they seek to clothe themselves shall not defend them from the wrath of God.”

The mention of Mount Perazim and the Valley of Gibeon is probably in reference to David’s victory over the Philistines at that place. We read: “So David went to Baal Perazim, and there he defeated them. He said, ‘As waters break out, the LORD has broken out against my enemies before me.’ So that place was called Baal Perazim. The Philistines abandoned their idols there, and David and his men carried them off.”<sup>3</sup>

V.21 contains the same double-edged meaning as vv.17-19 in which God’s hailstorm and flash flood swept away the covenant with death. The reference to Mount Perazim and the Valley of Gibeon and David’s victory over the Philistines may mean, first of all, that which God did before to the Philistines He will now do to Israel, His own people. But there is also the hidden suggestion that it is the God who caused

1. Ps. 118:22-24
2. Matt. 7:24-27
3. II Sam. 5:18-22

David to be victorious who is inflicting the punishment to His own people. God may allow death to swallow up His people, but He is not the God of the dead but of the living.<sup>1</sup> The fact that God's work is called strange and alien indicates that what happens goes against the character of God. Israel's and Judah's captivity is not what God had in mind for His people. Canaan was supposed to be the promise of rest God had prepared for His people, now God is about to destroy this place of rest. God created the Sabbath, the day of rest, now He breaks His own Sabbath. The Creator of the universe, the God of life, would die on a cross. Strange indeed!

Isaiah's warning, however, was not heeded. The people continued to mock God, as if they believed He would not react. Like the tenants of the vineyard in Jesus' parable they believed that if they killed those who came to collect the rent the vineyard would be theirs.<sup>2</sup> Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on the mockery that will make their chains heavier: "Choices form character, for good or ill. If they continue in cynical disregard of the Lord, they will come to the point beyond which reformation is impossible. Sinners become the architects of their own doom by continuing thoughtlessly in wrong choices. Reformation is also always urgent, because the Lord will not endlessly delay *the destruction decreed*. The only way to flee from God is to flee to him."

Vv.23-29 illustrate the "strange work," and "his alien task" mentioned in v.21 by means of a parable. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "Judah's situation is set forth in a parable. The farmer does not plow for the sake of plowing, but rather to prepare for his intended crop. So also God prepares his garden for the crop he wishes to reap - the crop of righteousness from a holy people. To this end God must employ the cutting and crumbling force of disciplinary judgments, perfectly adjusted to Israel's spiritual needs, just as the farmer (using the intelligence God gave him) uses the proper threshing instruments for each type of grain."

In a way the illustration seems to contradict the message of the prophecy. In the statement "the Lord, the LORD Almighty, has told me of the destruction decreed against the whole land," the announcement of judgment does not seem to indicate that God uses different methods of punishment or pays attention to individual needs and details. Yet, the parable speaks of purpose, wisdom and logic. We could say that from the viewpoint of the soil, the farmer's actions do not seem to make sense, but they do for the farmer. The same can be said about the way different sorts of grain are treated. The treatment is experienced as destructive, but the unseen purpose for the treatment makes sense. The point is probably best illustrated in Jesus' warning to Peter, who was about to deny Christ: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."<sup>3</sup> Satan's purpose was not to produce clean wheat but to destroy Peter's faith. God allowed the enemy to use strong measures to purify Peter from all that was chaff in his life. The destruction of the whole land is not what it seems to be. God's devastation of the Promised Land, Israel's place of rest, was meant to lead them into the real rest of God. God's breaking of the Sabbath would lead to a new creation, life out of death, an eternal Sabbath.

- ii. The second woe: is anything too hard for the Lord? (29:1-14)

***1 Woe to you, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David settled! Add year to year and let your cycle of festivals go on.***

***2 Yet I will besiege Ariel; she will mourn and lament, she will be to me like an altar hearth.***

***3 I will encamp against you all around; I will encircle you with towers and set up my siege works against you.***

***4 Brought low, you will speak from the ground; your speech will mumble out of the dust. Your voice will come ghostlike from the earth; out of the dust your speech will whisper.***

1. Matt. 22:31,32

2. See Matt. 33-41.

3. Luke 22:31,32

**5** *But your many enemies will become like fine dust, the ruthless hordes like blown chaff. Suddenly, in an instant,*

**6** *the LORD Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire.*

**7** *Then the hordes of all the nations that fight against Ariel, that attack her and her fortress and besiege her, will be as it is with a dream, with a vision in the night--*

**8** *as when a hungry man dreams that he is eating, but he awakens, and his hunger remains; as when a thirsty man dreams that he is drinking, but he awakens faint, with his thirst unquenched. So will it be with the hordes of all the nations that fight against Mount Zion.*

**9** *Be stunned and amazed, blind yourselves and be sightless; be drunk, but not from wine, stagger, but not from beer.*

**10** *The LORD has brought over you a deep sleep: He has sealed your eyes (the prophets); he has covered your heads (the seers).*

**11** *For you this whole vision is nothing but words sealed in a scroll. And if you give the scroll to someone who can read, and say to him, "Read this, please," he will answer, "I can't; it is sealed."*

**12** *Or if you give the scroll to someone who cannot read, and say, "Read this, please," he will answer, "I don't know how to read."*

**13** *The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.*

**14** *Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish."*

This section continues the thoughts of the previous one. The purpose of God's judgment of His people is not their destruction but their salvation, not to keep them in the dark but to make them people of light who understand the mind of God.

Ariel, in this context, is obviously Jerusalem. According to *Geneva Notes* "the Hebrew word Ariel signifies the Lion of God, and signifies the Altar, because the altar seemed to devour the sacrifice that was offered to God, as in Ezek 43:16." The verse in Ezekiel reads: "The altar hearth [*'ari'eyl*] is square, twelve cubits long and twelve cubits wide." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "That Jerusalem is here called by this name is very certain: but the reason for this name, and the meaning of it as applied to Jerusalem, is very obscure and doubtful. Some, with the Chaldee, suppose it to be taken from the hearth of the great altar of burnt-offerings, which Ezekiel plainly calls by the same name; and that Jerusalem is here considered as the seat of the fire of God." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* adds: "The many explanations of the name are interesting, but mainly conjectural." In spite of reservations these Bible scholars have about the meaning of Ariel, we are struck by the fact that "the Lion of God" and the altar in the temple share their name. The fact that the Lion of Judah [praise Yahweh] died on the altar in Jerusalem strongly suggests a reference to what would happen centuries later at Golgotha.

Vv.1-4 seem to refer to the siege, capture and destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar, but the promise of deliverance in the rest of the chapter seems to point to the failed attempt by Sennacherib.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with this insightful comment: "Since this 'woe' is a double message of hope – eleventh-hour deliverance (1–8) and coming spiritual transformation (9–14) – *woe* is not the most suitable translation. It is a summons to *Ariel* (1,2,7) to grasp two great truths: no problem is so far gone as to be insoluble to the Lord (1–8), and this applies spiritually as well as circumstantially (9–14). The same Lord who acts in judgment acts in transformation. He brings Ariel into the dust (1–4) and visits with spiritual coma those who have chosen blindness (9–12), but he also disperses the foe in his moment of triumph (5–8) and acts supernaturally to reverse wrongful understandings (13–14). Can it be, then, that Samaria faces both calamity and hope (28:1–6) and that the destruction decreed against Jerusalem is controlled by the purposeful, fruitful work of God (28:7–22, 23–29)? Yes indeed, for the Lord is never

defeated by any foe (1–8): he controls even the most threatening catastrophes. Nor is he baffled by the intransigence of the human heart: he is the Lord of transformation (9–14).”

The Hebrew word translated “woe” is *howy* which is an exclamation that either can mean “oh!” “ah,” “alas,” “ho,” “O,” or “woe.” Isaiah uses this word 23 times in his book. In most cases “woe” is the appropriate translation. But in the verses: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost,”<sup>1</sup> where *howy* is the opening word, “woe” would obviously be out of place. In the most famous “woe” in Isaiah, “Woe to me’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty,’”<sup>2</sup> the Hebrew word used is *owy*.

In v.2 the Hebrew text uses Ariel twice. *The New King James Version* maintains the cryptic Ariel in both places, reading: “Yet I will distress Ariel; There shall be heaviness and sorrow, And it shall be to Me as Ariel.” *The New International Version* translates the second Ariel with “an altar hearth.” *The New Living Translation* is even more explicit: “Yet I will bring disaster upon you, and there will be much weeping and sorrow. For Jerusalem will become as her name Ariel means — an altar covered with blood.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: “Ariel means ‘altar-hearth’ (Ezk. 43:15), the place of the ever-burning fire (Lv. 6:12–13). It was both the privilege (Ps.84:3–4) and the peril (Is. 33:14) of Zion to live with this fire, alike a danger to sinners (6:4) and the means of their salvation (6:6–7). It was the sign of God’s indwelling presence. Isaiah could hardly have chosen a more suitable cryptic title: Zion, the place of holy wrath and divine preservation.” The truth remains that Jerusalem, the Lion of God, the city of David, became the altar upon which the sin of the whole world was atoned for. Isaiah’s prophecy here may have conveyed initially that Jerusalem would be besieged and eventually reduced to ashes, but behind the first picture is hidden the second cosmic truth that God’s wrath was poured out at Jerusalem at one particular place upon one particular person, the Lion of Judah who is the Lamb that was slain.<sup>3</sup>

Keeping our eyes upon the picture behind the picture we see that the Ariel, the Lion of God is reduced in death. “[His] voice will come ghostlike from the earth; out of the dust [His] speech will whisper.” The earthquake Isaiah predicts here occurred on the first day of the week, the Sunday after Good Friday, when two women came to look at Jesus’ tomb. We read: “There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.”<sup>4</sup> That is the day Satan’s kingdom was blown apart. The devil will awake from his dream in which he thought he was stilling his hunger by devouring the whole world. He will find himself the hungriest of all God’s creatures. All this is symbolized in the wasting away of the Assyrian army and the breakdown of the Babylonian empire. In my lifetime I have seen Hitler’s mighty army turn into a pitiful bunch of POWs.

There are in v.9 some interesting words in the Hebrew text that merit a closer look. “Be stunned and amazed” is the translation of the two Hebrew verbs *mahahh* and *tamahh*. Placing them next two each other we can hear the alliteration. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* makes the interesting observation: “Hitmahm<sup>a</sup>huw, go on what-what-whatting, in a state of mental indetermination, till the overflowing scourge take you away.” The same speech pattern is found in the repetition of the verb *sha’a*. The Hebrew text reads: *Histah’ash’uw waasho’uw*, both are forms of *sha’a*, “to cry.”

Bible scholars generally interpret these verses in the sense that Isaiah’s audience reacts negatively or not at all to Isaiah’s prophecy because of the dullness of their mind. *The Pulpit Commentary*, for instance, observes: “The prophet bids them act as he knows that they will act. They will ‘stare with astonishment’ at a

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1. Isa. 55:1
  2. Isa.6:5
  3. See Rev. 5:5,6.
  4. Matt. 28:2-4

prophecy which will seem to them ‘out of all relation to facts’ .... They will not yield it the slightest credence. They will only marvel how a sane man could have uttered such egregious folly.” But we can also assume that God purposely withheld understanding in order to keep the message coded. If, as we supposed above, the hidden meaning in Isaiah’s words is Jesus’ sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection, it would be important that the enemy not be given any indication as to how he would be defeated. Answering the disciples’ question about Jesus’ use of parables, Jesus replied, ‘The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

But in order to do justice to Isaiah’s text we must see that the first application of the prophet’s words is to the people of his time, not to the archenemy of God. Incidentally, it is smart policy to hide the message to the enemy in a word to the public. World leaders often send messages to their opponent in the public speeches they make. Satan must have lent a keen ear to everything God told Israel. V.13 shows the connection between Israel’s lack of interest and understanding in God’s message to them, and the fact that their heart was not rightly related to God. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes about vv.11 and 12: “The lesson driven home illustratively in verses 11–12: the person who can read cannot be bothered to open the book; the person who cannot read is unconcerned to find someone who can.”

God’s analysis of Israel’s spiritual condition is that their heart is not in it. They go through the motions, they say the right words, but their lack of a living relationship with the Lord makes it meaningless. Jesus quoted Isaiah’s words to the people of His time, particularly the Pharisees. When they accused the disciples of eating without first performing the ritual of hand-washing, we read: “Jesus replied, ‘And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ ‘and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ ‘ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ ‘he is not to ‘honor his father’ ‘with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ ”<sup>2</sup>

To the church in Ephesus Jesus said: “If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”<sup>3</sup> There are churches from which the Holy Spirit has withdrawn, where the lampstand has been removed from its place, yet this has made no difference in the way they act.

Having heard God’s analysis we would expect to hear His judgment, but the following verses announce the exact opposite of what was to be expected. The Hebrew text of v.14 reads literally: “Therefore, behold I will proceed to do a marvelous work among these people, even a marvelous work and a wonder: for shall perish the wisdom of their wise men and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.” We must turn to the Apostle Paul to grasp the meaning of the “marvelous work” spoken about here. Paul quotes v.14 in his epistle to Corinth in which he explains the controversy of the cross. We read: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”<sup>4</sup>

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1. Matt. 13:11
  2. Matt. 15:3-9
  3. Rev. 2:5

## iii. The third woe: spiritual transformation (29:15–24)

**15** *Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, "Who sees us? Who will know?"*

**16** *You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "He did not make me"? Can the pot say of the potter, "He knows nothing"?*

**17** *In a very short time, will not Lebanon be turned into a fertile field and the fertile field seem like a forest?*

**18** *In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.*

**19** *Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.*

**20** *The ruthless will vanish, the mockers will disappear, and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down*

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**21** *those who with a word make a man out to be guilty, who ensnare the defender in court and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice.*

**22** *Therefore this is what the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, says to the house of Jacob: "No longer will Jacob be ashamed; no longer will their faces grow pale.*

**23** *When they see among them their children, the work of my hands, they will keep my name holy; they will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.*

**24** *Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding; those who complain will accept instruction."*

Vv.15 and 16 are addressed to those who purposely leave God out of their lives, not understanding that this amounts to spiritual suicide. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: "The background to this accusation of merely human planning which excludes God from their councils is indicated in 30:1–2, the Egyptian Alliance. But once more, Isaiah is concerned here not with the events in which they participated but with the principles which motivated them. To exalt the human and exclude the divine is the reversal (16a) of all that is right and proper. It is the equivalent to saying (16b) that he is no more than we are – the spirit of self-sufficiency – and that he has nothing to do with what we are (16cd) – the spirit of arrogance and usurpation. It is even like saying that he is less than we are (16ef) – the spirit of thoughtless stupidity – as if that which manifests thought, craft and purpose should deny these attributes to their originator. It is a denial of the Lord's distinctiveness (*like the clay*), sovereignty (*did not make*) and wisdom (*knows nothing*)."

Our human problem is that we believe that darkness hides things and us from God. David concluded: "If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you."<sup>1</sup> The God who created darkness is not limited by it.

The picture of a potter who makes pots out of clay is one of the best illustrations in the Bible of the relationship we, as God's creatures, have with our Creator. Jeremiah elaborates more about this in the object lesson God gave him. We read: "This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: 'Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message.' So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the LORD came to me: 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?' declares the LORD. 'Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not

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4. I Cor. 1:18-25

1. Ps. 139:11,12

inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.”<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew has one single word for “You turn things upside down,” *hophek*, which has a connotation of perversity. Perversity is the lack of recognition that God, our Creator, has the right to do with us as He pleases. The right attitude is probably most beautifully expressed in the hymn:

“Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!  
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.  
Mould me and make me after Thy will,  
while I am waiting yielded and still.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments here: “They were so perverse and wrong-headed that they inverted the relation in which they stood to God and God to them. God was to be passive, or merely give opportunities of action, and *they* were to mould their own plans and carve out their own destinies.” Actually, turning things upside down means that we are the potter and God is the clay. It means that we mould God in our own image. Perversity means that we project our evil thoughts upon God. The Israelites suspected God of the most evil motives in delivering them out of Egypt. We read: “But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert.’”<sup>2</sup> The people in Isaiah’s day went one step further in projecting their own ignorance and stupidity upon God. “He knows nothing!”

We would expect that God’s answer to such ignorant pride would be annihilation or at least harsh punishment. The answer is another of Isaiah’s great surprises of which his prophecy is filled. God will do exactly the opposite of what we would expect. He will bring about a complete transformation in the people who rejected Him. We find the same surprise in the conclusion of Jesus’ *Parable about the Tenants and the Vineyard*. When He finished the story, Jesus asked the public what the owner of the vineyard ought to do to those who killed his son. We read: “ ‘He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,’ they replied, ‘and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘ ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’ ”<sup>3</sup> Instead of killing the murderers God raised up His Son, conquering death for us all.

Vv.17-21 do not lack condemnation. The ruthless, the mockers and those who pervert justice will receive their due, but the deaf and blind will be healed and the downtrodden lifted up. To those who turn things upside down, God says that He will do His own turning upside down. This is expressed in the images of v.17. The forest will become a plowed field, meaning that the trees will be cut down. But the field will be turned into a forest. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: “Note the abruptness with which this promise of transformation is introduced. People can deny God his proper place, but he is still the Lord. He does what he will in heaven and earth (Ps. 135:6). He needs no permission. *In a very short time*, as the Lord reckons time (2 Pet. 3:8), even creation itself will be transformed. *Lebanon* typifies what is not the product of human cultivation (Ps. 104:16); the fertile field is ‘garden-land,’ the product of human cultivation. But since the whole creation is infected by human sin, nothing is as it should be. It all needs turning upside down! What appeared as wildness will exhibit its true nature as the Creator’s perfect design; what we thought to be an ordered garden will, in retrospect, seem like wild *forest!*”

For the sake of clarity we copy the above-mentioned references: “The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.”<sup>4</sup> “But do not forget this one

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1. Jer. 18:1-10
  2. Num. 21:4,5
  3. Matt. 21:41,42
  4. Ps. 135:6

thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”<sup>1</sup> “The trees of the LORD are well watered, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.”<sup>2</sup> Later on in his prophecy, Isaiah will repeat the promise of healing for the blind and the deaf. “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.”<sup>3</sup> Although this may be interpreted as physical healing, the context suggests that the real healing will be spiritual; God’s people will again be able to hear His Word and see His deeds. After all, the cutting down of Lebanon’s forest does not refer to a literal deforestation. The last verse of this chapter is proof of this: “Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding; those who complain will accept instruction.”

The reference to Abraham in v.22 is remarkable and deserves a closer look. This is the only place in Scripture where Abraham’s call is referred to as an act of redemption. The Hebrew word translated “redeemed” is *padah*, which literally means “to sever.” It has the connotation of “ransom.” The first time the word is used is in connection with the sacrifice of a first-born. We read: “*Redeem* with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not *redeem* it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.”<sup>4</sup> When God called Abraham, He told him: “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.” Abraham severed the ties with his family and his country to become God’s first-born. God redeemed him by providing a ransom, not only for him but also for Israel and ultimately for the whole world. The Apostle Paul explains how the ransom of Abraham was realized and what effect it would have upon the world. We read: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”<sup>5</sup>

For Jacob to be no longer ashamed, they must have been ashamed to begin with. The prophet does not explain why and how Israel would react with shame, but other parts of Scripture help us to understand the reason for her embarrassment. Zechariah prophesied: “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land will mourn, each clan by itself, with their wives by themselves: the clan of the house of David and their wives, the clan of the house of Nathan and their wives, the clan of the house of Levi and their wives, the clan of Shimei and their wives, and all the rest of the clans and their wives.”<sup>6</sup> The Apostle John widens Zechariah’s circle to include the whole world. We read in Revelation: “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.”<sup>7</sup> The whole world population will unite with Israel in lament when they realize what they have done to God in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is of this shame that Isaiah says here “No longer will Jacob be ashamed; no longer will their faces grow pale.” It will be the realization that what happened in Israel in the rejection of the Son of God ultimately means the salvation of the whole world that will dry Jacob’s tears.

The Apostle Paul explains the relationship between Israel’s fall and restoration and the salvation of the rest of the world. We read: “Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their

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1. II Pet. 3:8
  2. Ps. 104:16
  3. See Isa. 35:5.
  4. Ex. 13:13
  5. Gal. 3:13,14
  6. Zech. 12:10-14
  7. Rev. 1:7

transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!"<sup>1</sup> And: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.' As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all."<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah depicts the situation as if Abraham and Jacob are looking down from heaven with more than great concern about what happens to their offspring. The author of Hebrews turns this scene around and makes us look up to heaven instead of heaven looking down upon us. We read: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus..."<sup>3</sup> In both directions the important thing is the what God has done in the redemption of mankind. The fact that "those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding; those who complain will accept instruction" is the work of God's hand. It is, in the above-quoted words of the Apostle Paul, "in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

The Hebrew text of v.24 reads literally: "They shall also come that erred in spirit [to] understanding, and they that murmured shall learn doctrine." The Hebrew word *leqach*, "doctrine," means literally "something received," particularly "mental instruction." *The New International Version* renders it: "understanding." The word is found five times in *The Book of Proverbs*.<sup>5</sup> In Proverbs it means mostly "learning," like in "let the wise listen and add to their *learning*, and let the discerning get guidance."<sup>6</sup> But in one case it is used by a prostitute in a corrupt sense: "With *persuasive words* she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk."<sup>7</sup> Although devious in that context, its use there proves that "doctrine" does not always have that cut and dry character we often attribute to it. In the verse that renders the speech of the prostitute, *The King James Version* gives the translation "her much fair speech."

iv. The fourth woe: faithlessness and faithfulness (30:1–33)

***1 "Woe to the obstinate children," declares the LORD, "to those who carry out plans that are not mine, forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit, heaping sin upon sin;***

***2 who go down to Egypt without consulting me; who look for help to Pharaoh's protection, to Egypt's shade for refuge.***

***3 But Pharaoh's protection will be to your shame, Egypt's shade will bring you disgrace.***

***4 Though they have officials in Zoan and their envoys have arrived in Hanes,***

***5 everyone will be put to shame because of a people useless to them, who bring neither help nor advantage, but only shame and disgrace."***

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1. Rom. 11:11,12

2. Rom. 11:25-32

3. Heb. 12:1,2

4. Gal. 3:13,14

5. Prov. 1:5; 4:2; 7:21; 9:9; 16:21,23

6. Prov. 1:5

7. Prov. 7:21

*6 An oracle concerning the animals of the Negev: Through a land of hardship and distress, of lions and lionesses, of adders and darting snakes, the envoys carry their riches on donkeys' backs, their treasures on the humps of camels, to that unprofitable nation,*

*7 to Egypt, whose help is utterly useless. Therefore I call her Rahab the Do-Nothing.*

*8 Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness.*

*9 These are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the LORD's instruction.*

*10 They say to the seers, "See no more visions!" and to the prophets, "Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions.*

*11 Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!"*

*12 Therefore, this is what the Holy One of Israel says: "Because you have rejected this message, relied on oppression and depended on deceit,*

*13 this sin will become for you like a high wall, cracked and bulging, that collapses suddenly, in an instant.*

*14 It will break in pieces like pottery, shattered so mercilessly that among its pieces not a fragment will be found for taking coals from a hearth or scooping water out of a cistern."*

*15 This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.*

*16 You said, 'No, we will flee on horses.' Therefore you will flee! You said, 'We will ride off on swift horses.' Therefore your pursuers will be swift!*

*17 A thousand will flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you will all flee away, till you are left like a flagstaff on a mountaintop, like a banner on a hill."*

*18 Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!*

*19 O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you.*

*20 Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them.*

*21 Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."*

*22 Then you will defile your idols overlaid with silver and your images covered with gold; you will throw them away like a menstrual cloth and say to them, "Away with you!"*

*23 He will also send you rain for the seed you sow in the ground, and the food that comes from the land will be rich and plentiful. In that day your cattle will graze in broad meadows.*

*24 The oxen and donkeys that work the soil will eat fodder and mash, spread out with fork and shovel.*

*25 In the day of great slaughter, when the towers fall, streams of water will flow on every high mountain and every lofty hill.*

*26 The moon will shine like the sun, and the sunlight will be seven times brighter, like the light of seven full days, when the LORD binds up the bruises of his people and heals the wounds he inflicted.*

*27 See, the Name of the LORD comes from afar, with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke; his lips are full of wrath, and his tongue is a consuming fire.*

*28 His breath is like a rushing torrent, rising up to the neck. He shakes the nations in the sieve of destruction; he places in the jaws of the peoples a bit that leads them astray.*

*29 And you will sing as on the night you celebrate a holy festival; your hearts will rejoice as when people go up with flutes to the mountain of the LORD, to the Rock of Israel.*

*30 The LORD will cause men to hear his majestic voice and will make them see his arm coming down with raging anger and consuming fire, with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail.*

*31 The voice of the LORD will shatter Assyria; with his scepter he will strike them down.*

**32 Every stroke the LORD lays on them with his punishing rod will be to the music of tambourines and harps, as he fights them in battle with the blows of his arm.**

**33 Topheth has long been prepared; it has been made ready for the king. Its fire pit has been made deep and wide, with an abundance of fire and wood; the breath of the LORD, like a stream of burning sulfur, sets it ablaze.**

In introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “The advent of the names Egypt (2) and Assyria (31), bracketing the fourth woe, herald the fact that Isaiah is starting to apply the principles of the first three woes to the events of the time. In the first woe (28:1–29) he established that the Lord works purposefully (28:23–29), even when the pathway lies through disaster (28:1–4, 5–6), for his judgments do not revise his promises; and that he calls his people to accept and trust his word (28:12, 16). All this is now demonstrated in the actuality of history. In verses 1–7 Isaiah condemns the Egyptian Alliance, affirming that Egypt will be no help (5–7). Matching this, at the end of the chapter (27–33) he insists that Assyria will be no threat. In between this inclusio, verses 8–17 and 18–26 are a balanced statement: the word of the Lord rejected (8–17 and 18–26 and (18–26) the word of promise kept.”

The Hebrew word translated “obstinate” in v.1 is *carar* which literally means “to turn away.” Sometimes it is translated “stubborn.” Hosea gives us the picture of heifer that tries to pull away from the yoke. “The Israelites are stubborn, like a stubborn heifer. How then can the LORD pasture them like lambs in a meadow?”<sup>1</sup>

V.1 contains an idiom that has caused Bible scholars some problems of interpretation. *The King James Version* gives a literal rendering of the Hebrew “that cover with a covering.” *The Septuagint’s* Greek translation suggests that it means the pouring out of a sacrifice, which may have been the ritual that accompanied the making of a covenant.

The condemnation is that the Israelites made a covenant with Egypt instead of with the Lord. They put themselves under Pharaoh’s protection instead of under the Lord’s. The Hebrew word *maccekah*, “covering” has multiple meanings, referring to pouring out or covering. It is used in the making of the gold calf by Aaron. “He took what they handed him and made it into an idol *cast* in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’” Earlier on in *Isaiah* it is translated “blanket.” “The bed is too short to stretch out on, *the blanket* too narrow to wrap around you.”<sup>2</sup>

Backsliding in these verses is defined as carrying out one’s own plan instead of God’s. It is not sinful to make plans, God created us in such a way that we can do some creative thinking. But it is important to consult God in the plans we make. *The Book of Proverbs* gives us the pertinent advice: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”<sup>3</sup>

Commenting on v.5: “everyone will be put to shame,” *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The reference is not to the ambassadors, who felt no shame in their embassy, and probably returned elated by the promises made them; but to the subsequent feelings of the Jewish nation, when it was discovered by sad experience that no reliance was to be placed on ‘the strength of Pharaoh.’ ” In recent history we have the incident that preceded World War II when the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain returned for his conference with Adolf Hitler in Munich and proclaimed: “Peace in our time!” One year later Europe was in a state of war.

Alec J. Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on vv.6 and 7: “The separate heading in verse 6 indicates a separate poem – of beautifully crafted, sharp, compulsive Hebrew – which Isaiah publicized (see 8) to drive

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1. Hos. 4:16
  2. Isa. 28:20
  3. Prov. 3:5,6

the message home. The cryptic title would excite interest and provoke questions (cf. 8:1). In verses 1–5 Isaiah emphasized the merely human planning that lay behind the Egyptian embassy; here, the sacrificial human cost. But no matter what wisdom we exercise or labor we expend, we cannot be the authors of our own security. *The animals*: what irony! The question in every mouth was, ‘How will our ambassadors fare?’ Isaiah said, ‘Never mind them. Think about the poor beasts!’ *Hardship ... distress*: the ordinary route to Egypt lay through Philistia. It would seem, however that (in the interests of secrecy?) they went through the Negeb. In Exodus 13:17 the Lord would not let his people journey through Philistia lest opposition turn them back to Egypt. Did the ambassadors realize they were exactly reversing the exodus? *Rahab* seems to have had currency as a nickname for Egypt (Ps. 87:4; cf. 51:9). It means ‘turbulence, boastfulness.’ Perhaps ‘Big Mouth’ would catch Isaiah’s sense! *Egypt*: overflowing with promises, but in the event *the Do-nothing*.”

The references in Psalms 87:4 and 51:9 read: “I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me — Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush — and will say, ‘This one was born in Zion.’” And: “Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.”

As is indicated above, the title of this poem is startling. *The New International Version* calls it “An oracle concerning the animals of the Negev.” The Hebrew text reads literally: “The burden of the beasts in the land of the south.” The Hebrew word *massa*’ has the double meaning of “a burden,” and “a prophecy.” The word occurs fourteen times in Isaiah. In all cases but two it refers to a prophecy. In this chapter, Isaiah manages to suggest that it has both a literal and a figurative meaning. The animals carry a heavy burden of presents for the Pharaoh of Egypt and they are also the embodiment of a prophecy. Like Balaam’s donkey they are transmitters of the Word of God.<sup>1</sup> The animals went through, what Moses called, “that vast and dreadful desert” that Israel had crossed on its way from Egypt to Canaan, but they had no column of fire to protect them. They were forced to travel in enemy territory without divine cover.

In vv.8-11 God says to Isaiah: “Write this down.” The reason the people of Judah, under Hezekiah’s leadership, made the wrong decision was because they had not only neglected the Word of God, they had rejected it. In the case in which Joshua and the Israelites mistakenly made a covenant with the Gibeonites, they forgot to consult the Lord.<sup>2</sup> In Isaiah’s day it was not a case of mere neglect but of rebellion.

Commenting on “the tablet” and “the scroll,” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “Isaiah is commanded to make a public record (*tablet*) and a private one (*scroll*) of his ministry ... The *tablet* is to be *for them* (lit. ‘among them’) where they have access to it; the *scroll* or ‘book’ is to be *an everlasting witness*. It is the imperishable word of God; its immediate relevance did not exhaust its endless significance.”

God calls the people of Judah rebellious and deceitful. They were rebellious against God and they deceived themselves in following their own understanding instead of listening to what God had to say to them. They told the prophets, including Isaiah, to stop passing on to them the visions God gave. The only sermons they wanted to hear were, what we could call, “seeker sensitive ones.” Proclaiming judgment would have hurt their feelings.

We live in an age or a dispensation where the only source of divine revelation is the written Word of God. This does not mean that there are no visions or revelations possible, but when they occur they are judged by the written Word. God has left us the Bible to guide us out of our rebellion against Him and to heal our deceitful hearts. The Apostle Peter confirms this in his second epistle, saying: “So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.”<sup>3</sup>

1. Num. 22:21-33

2. See Josh. Chapter 9, particularly vv.14,15.

3. II Peter 1:12-15

V.30 reads in *The New International Version* “stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!” *The King James Version* sticks closer to the Hebrew text with “cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us.” The Hebrew word used is *shabath* which means “to repose,” in the sense of “to desist from exertion.” We find the word for the first time in Scripture in the verses: “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he *rested* from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah clearly expresses the root of Israel’s problem that they refused to enter into God’s Sabbath, that is in God’s rest. This reminds us of the exhortation of the writer of Hebrews: “Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, ‘So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘ ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ ‘ And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: ‘And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.’ And again in the passage above he says, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath — rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.”<sup>2</sup>

God’s answer to the people is again astounding to the highest degree. After showing them the result of their revolt, God comes with a proposal for peace. The pact with Egypt was considered to be a protection against the Assyrian threat: a wall of defense. In a spiritual sense it was a wall of sin that imprisoned them, a wall that made them lose their freedom. The word “ruin” has the primary meaning of a collapsed building. A ruined life is like a house built on the sand that crashes when the elements beat upon it.<sup>3</sup> The collapse of their wall would be so total that not even part of the ruin could be used for rebuilding. The pieces will be like shards of pottery that have been pulverized. There will not even be a fragment left that can be used for simple acts like scooping water from a cistern.

The first application of the image of the wall and its destruction is that the Egyptian alliance will not only have no practical value for protection against the enemy, but that it will be the factor that lead to a complete bankruptcy. The end result of this pact would be the Babylonian captivity for all of Judah.

The amazing part of the story is that these events took place during the reign of King Hezekiah, about whom the Bible gives a very positive report. We read: “He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done. He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses. And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, he made the most single fatal mistake that would lead to Judah’s ultimate ruin. He did well, better than any of the other kings of Judah, but he did not well enough.

V.15 reads literally in the Hebrew text: “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.” The Hebrew word for “return” is *shuwbah* which is only found in this verse in Scripture. The Hebrew word, rendered “rest” is *nachath* which has the meaning of “a descent,”

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1. Gen. 2:2,3
  2. Heb. 4:1-11
  3. See Jesus’ parable in Matt. 7:24-27.
  4. II Kings 18:3,4, 5-7

either in a favorable or unfavorable way. Isaiah uses this word twice in this chapter. In v.30 it is used in an adverse sense: “The LORD will cause men to hear his majestic voice and will make them see his arm *coming down* with raging anger and consuming fire, with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail.” Isaiah’s words ring through in Jesus’ invitation: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew word rendered “flee” is *nuwc* which literally means “to move quickly.” *Barnes’ Notes* comments upon this: “The word ‘flee’ *nuwc*, usually signifies to flee before or from any person or thing. But here it seems to have the notion of making a rapid motion in general, and not to refer to the fact that they expected to flee ‘from’ their enemy, for it does not seem to have been a part of their expectation. The idea seems to be that by their alliance with Egypt they would secure the means of ‘rapid motion,’ whatever might be the necessity or occasion for it, whether against or from an enemy. The sense is, ‘we will by this alliance secure the assistance of cavalry;’ and, doubtless, the design was to employ it in the attack and discomfiture of their foes. It will be recollected that Moses (Deut 17:16) strictly forbade that the future monarch of the Jews should ‘multiply horses to himself, to cause the people to return to Egypt,’ and that consequently the employment of cavalry was against the laws of the nation ... The attempt, therefore, in the time of Hezekiah to call in the aid of the cavalry of Egypt, was a violation of both the letter and the spirit of the Jewish institutions.”

Salvation consists in entering into God’s rest. This rest will be the restoration of our soul and it will be the crashing down of the wall of sin that kept us in prison. The double meaning of *nachath* turns out to be one of salvation.

In reality God offers Himself here to Judah as their protection. He says: “Let me do for you what you try to do for yourself but cannot do.” The only thing needed was to stop doing what they did and put their trust in God. We repeat part of the above quotation from *The Epistle to the Hebrews*: “For anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”<sup>2</sup> The simple faith that God could be trusted for their protection would have made Judah completely safe. We have reason to believe that if even one person would have stood up among the Judeans and demonstrated this faith, God would have proved him right. When the prophet Elijah was taken up in heaven, Elisha cried out: “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!”<sup>3</sup> Elijah’s faith had been a better protection for Israel than all Israel’s cavalry.

In response to the people’s rejection of God’s protection the words “you will flee” recur like a cadence, like the chorus of a song. The words are actually borrowed from Moses’ warning to Israel about the results of their disobedience: “But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it. I will set my face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies; those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even when no one is pursuing you.”<sup>4</sup> Even a numerical majority is no protection if God is not with us. Jonathan demonstrated the other side of the truth that God can use one person who confides in Him as well as a whole army. When Jonathan decided to attack the Philistines single-handedly, he said to his servant: “Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few.”<sup>5</sup> One person plus God is always a majority.

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1. Matt. 11:28-30
  2. Heb. 4:10
  3. II Kings 2:12
  4. Lev. 26:14-17
  5. I Sam 14:6

The solitary “flagstaff on a mountaintop” and the “banner on a hill” are indications that people used to be there, but they are all gone. The only thing remaining is the symbols.

Yet, the grace and justice of God does not allow Him to give up on His people. Grace stands for forgiveness that was not merited and justice refers to the satisfaction of God’s demands. The Hebrew text of v.18 reads literally: “And therefore Yahweh will wait, that He may be gracious unto you and therefore He will be exalted that He may have mercy upon you for Yahweh is an Elohim of judgment...” The Hebrew word rendered “gracious” is *hanan* which literally means “to stoop in kindness to an inferior.” How deeply God stooped down became evident when the Word became flesh and lived among us. When Jesus became obedient to death on the cross.

Vv.18-26 gives us a deep and intimate insight in God’s character and His reaction to Judah’s stubborn refusal. We not only hurt ourselves when we fail to obey God, we hurt God also. Our tendency is to believe that God is above the experience of hurt. We suppose that we wrongly project our human emotions upon God when we say God feels wounded. Being created in the image and likeness of God, however, means that God has projected His feelings and emotions upon us. If this were no so, the Apostle Paul could never have written: “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”<sup>1</sup>

In v.18 the word “justice” seems to clash with God’s “compassion.” The Hebrew word *racham*, “compassion,” refers to the womb. It expresses the feeling a pregnant woman has toward the fetus she carries. Justice is the translation of *mishpat*, meaning “a verdict.” It indicates the legal steps God took to deal with our sins. Since our sins have been dealt with in Jesus’ death on the cross, nothing keeps God from pouring out His intimate love upon us.

The Hebrew word “wait” occurs twice in v.18, once in “the LORD longs,” and once in “all who wait.” Our waiting for God expresses our longing for Him as He longs for us.

Summarizing God’s promise in vv.18-26, J. Alec Motyer states, in *Isaiah*: “The topic of this woe so far has been human faithlessness: the faithless ‘wisdom’ which sought Egypt’s aid (1–7), and the unbelieving spurning of the word of the Lord (8–17). The remainder of the woe turns to the faithfulness of God: his faithfulness to what he has promised (18–26) and his faithfulness to his undeserving people in their moment of crisis (27–33). First, then, though they spurn his word (8–17) he keeps his word: grace and compassion lie in readiness (18); he will respond to prayer (19); beyond affliction lies a readiness to hear his word of guidance (20–21) and a disgusted rejection of false religion (22). There will be every earthly abundance (24–25) and the renewal of creation in the day of healing (26).”

Isaiah’s words gain depth if we realize that they were spoken almost one century before the Babylonian captivity, which must have been a disaster similar in magnitude to what Hitler did to the Jews of Europe in the Holocaust. This was the message with which God sent them into captivity. On the one hand this Word of God must have seemed incongruous to the horrible reality the people of Jerusalem faced at that moment. The words of the Psalmist: “O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us — he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks”<sup>2</sup> give us an idea how Babylon treated the Jews. On the other hand, those who were able to fix their eyes on what lay beyond the horizon may have drawn eternal comfort from the Word with which God had prepared them for the ordeal. I know of a man who, facing a Nazi firing squad, sang: “Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight.”<sup>3</sup>

One amazing feature in the promise God gives to Isaiah is the reversal of scenes. This is, first of all, evident in the way guidance is presented. In presenting Himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus says: “The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his

1. Eph. 4:30
2. Ps. 137:8,9
3. Ps. 43:4

own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."<sup>1</sup> But the teachers in Isaiah, although they are visible in front, give their guidance from behind. "Your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.' "

The prophet Joel announced the coming of the day of the Lord, saying: "The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD."<sup>2</sup> Isaiah depicts the brightness of God's coming as: "The moon will shine like the sun, and the sunlight will be seven times brighter, like the light of seven full days, when the LORD binds up the bruises of his people and heals the wounds he inflicted." Maybe we can say that what is dark for some will be bright for others, depending on the condition of one's heart and one's relationship to God.

*The New Living Translation* renders v.22: "Then you will destroy all your silver idols and gold images. You will throw them out like filthy rags. 'Ugh!' you will say to them. 'Begone!' " *The New International Version* sticks to the Hebrew original with: "Then you will defile your idols overlaid with silver and your images covered with gold; you will throw them away like a menstrual cloth and say to them, 'Away with you!' " The Hebrew word rendered "defile" is *tame'* which means "to pollute," or "to be polluted." The word *tame'* is for the first time in the case of the rape of Jacob's daughter, Dinah. "When Jacob heard that his daughter Dinah *had been defiled*, his sons were in the fields with his livestock; so he kept quiet about it until they came home."<sup>3</sup> The sexual connotation which seems to be attached to the word describes well the difference in relationships with God or with idols. Idol worship is like infidelity in a marriage relationship or like immorality outside marriage.

J. Alec Motyer, commenting on v.22 in *Isaiah*, states: "This is the necessary negative side of their positive relationship with the Lord. Separation to the Lord must show itself in separation from what is false and wrong. The care they lavished on their idols (*silver ... gold*) will be replaced by disrespect (*defile*), revulsion (*menstrual cloth*) and rejection (*away with you*)." The same commentary continues on vv.23,24: "In contrast to the poverty of bread and water (20), there is a coming abundance. This is not a materialistic vision as such, but a vision of creation restored. Sin brought a restraint on the in-built processes of creation (Gn.3:17-19), but the coming glory will see the curse removed (11:6-9; Am. 9:13). The Lord will play his part in this new earth (23a), and earth will respond richly (23b; Ho. 2:21-22). In contrast to the afflictive labor to which human wisdom put them (6-7), the beasts will share the bounty of the new creation (24)." Rather than looking at these words exclusively as the description of a new creation, we could read them as an Old Testament expression of spiritual blessing, which is given in terms of material well-being. *The Pulpit Commentary* concurs with this, stating: "No doubt there is a secondary allegorical meaning running through the whole description of Judah's prosperity (vers. 23-26). In this allegorical intention the waters stand for the streams of God's grace."

The images in v.25 are probably meant even more allegorical than the other word-pictures in this section. Isaiah gives no explanation about the towers that are falling. The Hebrew word rendered "tower" is *migdal*. We find it used for the first time in the Bible in connection with the building of the tower of Babel. "Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a *tower* that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.' "<sup>4</sup> Isaiah has used the tower before as an image of rebellion. We read: "The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled), for all the cedars of Lebanon, tall and lofty, and all the oaks of Bashan, for all the towering mountains and all the high hills, for every lofty *tower* and every

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1. John 10:2-5
  2. Joel 2:31
  3. Gen. 34:5
  4. Gen. 11:4

fortified wall, for every trading ship and every stately vessel. The arrogance of man will be brought low and the pride of men humbled; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day, and the idols will totally disappear.”<sup>1</sup> These verses best describe the intent of the announcement of God’s judgment upon human pride, which is probably what is meant here.

The day of slaughter is also the day when God heals the bruises of His people and the wounds He inflicted. We find the same two elements in John’s description of the end times in Revelation. On the one hand is the great slaughter, about which he writes: “And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, ‘Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great’ ... The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand is the promise: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”<sup>3</sup>

In the last section of this chapter, vv.27-33, Isaiah continues poetically the description of the Day of the Lord, applying it particularly to the fall of the Assyrian empire. But that contemporary event seems to be used as a model of the judgment that will take place at the end of the world.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: “This final section of the woe matches the first (1–7). The Lord’s people turn from him to Egypt, but he does not turn from them when Assyria threatens. This accords with the heart of the matter (8–26), that though they spurn his word (8–17) he keeps his word (18–26). What then will happen when Assyria attacks? Why, the kind of Assyria coming to Jerusalem is climbing on to his own funeral pyre! Isaiah starts with the ‘real’ day of the Lord (27–28). He is Lord over all the nations. (By implication, what is Assyria, compared with such a God!) The Lord’s people will be safe in his Day (29–30): their part will be to sing amid the judgments of God (24:14–16). So then, regarding Assyria in the here and now (31–33), they will be shattered (31), Judah will sing (32), the funeral pyre is ready and so is the fire (33). Once more the structure of the verses proclaims their message: the great surrounding bracket is the Lord. In the Hebrew, *the Name of the LORD* is the first line and *the breath of the LORD* is the last. The next bracket is his lordship over the nations as a whole (27–28) and over Assyria in particular (30–33), and at the heart of the poem is the singing people (29). Both on the large scale (27–28) and in the actual events of history (30–33), the Lord’s people are central to his concerns.”

This whole section is full of opposing and conflicting images, of things that exclude one another. God’s judgment is depicted both as fire and water, things that do not coexist peacefully. People cannot be put in a sieve and be led around with a bit at the same time. Destruction and singing do not fit together either. In combining these extreme opposites, Isaiah achieves a breathtaking climax of poetry that expresses the glory of God’s victory over human evil.

The opening words in v.27 “See, the Name of the LORD comes from afar” immediately catch our attention because they suggest an unusual event. The whole section implies that it is the Lord Himself who comes. It is not someone coming in the name of God, representing God. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “ ‘The Name of Jehovah’ is scarcely distinguishable from Jehovah himself. Jehovah, who has long hid himself, and seemed to keep himself remote from worldly affairs, now is about to manifest his glory, and interpose in the doings of men in a wonderful way.” The Name of the LORD is the character of God. The emphasis is on God’s glory, which is the standard by which all human behavior is judged. Paul’s definition of sin, as falling short of the glory of God,<sup>4</sup> helps us to understand what Isaiah is saying here.

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1. Isa. 2:12-18
  2. Rev. 19:17,18,21
  3. Rev. 21:4
  4. See Rom. 3:23.

The fact that the Name of the LORD comes from afar seems to contradict the truth of God's omnipresence. What is meant is, probably, that although God is always present, mankind is not recognizing His presence. They cannot see His glory. God's judgment always consists in a comparison between His glory and our condition, which is far from glorious. God's judgment is presented in the form of a huge fire that turns the earth into a scorched wasteland and also as a flood in which people drown and are swept away.

The Apostle Peter speaks of both forms of judgment upon this earth. We read: "But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men." And: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat."<sup>1</sup> The one form of judgment, the flood, has already covered the earth in the past, the other, the fire, is still to come at the end of time.

God's judgment here is a judging of nations, not of individuals. The nations of the world are put in the sieve of God's judgment. The sieve of destruction is literally in Hebrew "the sieve of vanity." The Hebrew word *shav*, "vanity" has the multiple sense of "desolating; evil, ruin, uselessness, or deception." Sieves are instruments of separation. The mesh of a sieve lets some things through and hold others back. This image seems to be a combination of two parables used in the New Testament, one of separation of individuals and the other of evaluation of works. Jesus said in the first parable: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."<sup>2</sup> The sheep are those who treated their fellowmen with love and compassion because they demonstrated the love of Christ in their human relationships, even though they did not recognize they were actually doing this to Jesus who identified Himself with the underdog. The goats did not recognize Christ in their fellowmen and so they treated the neighbor, whom they were supposed to love as themselves, with neglect and disrespect.<sup>3</sup>

The Apostle Paul illustrates the God's judgment upon the way we live our life with the parable of the construction of a building. He writes: "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."<sup>4</sup>

Although the sieve God uses is called "the sieve of destruction" or "the sieve of vanity" it is meant to separate, not to destroy. It is God's instrument of separation of individuals and of the acts of individuals. And, as Paul's parable illustrates, the difference between the sheep and the goats is whether life is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ or not. In Isaiah's day the Word had not yet become flesh, so in that sense one could not build a life upon Christ. But the Word that would become flesh was there and the principle could be distinguished for the Old Testament people as well as for us.

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1. II Peter 3:5-7,10-13
  2. Matt. 25:31-33
  3. See Matt. 25:34-46.
  4. I Cor. 3:10-15

One other amazing feature in Isaiah's prophetic word here is that God's acts of judgment are accompanied by music made by those who love Him. God even coordinates His deeds to the rhythm of the music. V.29 puts the first Passover celebration in Egypt in the same picture frame with Israel's arrival at the foot of Mount Sinai. While the angel of death made the rounds through the Egyptian houses, killing every firstborn son, Israel intoned a hymn of salvation under the protection of the blood of the lamb, feasting on the lamb's meat and eating "the bread of sincerity and truth."<sup>1</sup> In the Exodus account we do not read that any songs were sung or any music was played. It is not until the celebration of the Passover by Jesus and His disciples, when Jesus celebrated the first communion service with them, that we read: "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."<sup>2</sup> The hymn they sang was called: "The Egyptian Hallel," which consisted of the psalms 113-118. Actually, at Israel's arrival at Mount Sinai it was God who played the music and beat the drums. We read: "On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast."<sup>3</sup>

We see the same combination of judgment and music in *The Book of Revelation*. While "Babylon the Great" is being destroyed on earth the choir in heaven sings the Hallelujah Chorus.<sup>4</sup>

Assyria is singled out in this passage as the object of God's judgment, but the tone of the verses suggests a cosmic context. God's judgment upon human sin is universal and constant. As the Apostle Paul states: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."<sup>5</sup> God's wrath is one of God's eternal attributes. All that falls short of the glory of God is eternally being confronted by the wrath of God.

Topheth, mentioned in v.33, initially refers to a valley outside Jerusalem. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* explains that Topheth was "a place of abomination: a grove or garden in the valley of the sons of Hinnom, southeast of Jerusalem, where Israel offered human sacrifices to Moloch by fire; hence, a place of burning (2 Kings 23:10; Jer 7:31) ... It was the receptacle of the refuse of the city, to consume which fires were constantly burning. Hence, it came to express Hell, the place of torment. In the former sense it was a fit place to symbolize the funeral pyre of the Assyrian army (not that it actually perished there): the Hebrews did not burn, but buried their dead, but the pagan Assyrians are to be burnt as a mark of ignominy. In the latter sense, Tophet is the receptacle 'prepared for the devil (the antitype to 'the king' of Assyria, Isa 14:12-15) and his angels,' and unbelieving men (Matt 5:22; 25:41; Mark 9:43-44) ... Tophet was originally the king's music grove, as Chinneroth is the harpers. Afterward it was defiled by Baal and idols, and regarded as the gate of hell, the receptacle of abominations; and finally it became 'the valley of slaughter' (Jer 7:32; 19:6)."

For the sake of clarity we copy the imbedded Scripture references:

- "He [King Josiah] desecrated Topheth, which was in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, so no one could use it to sacrifice his son or daughter in the fire to Molech."<sup>6</sup>

- "They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire — something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind. So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call it Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, for they will bury the dead in Topheth until there is no more room."<sup>7</sup>

- "How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my

1. See Ex. 12:21-30 and I Cor. 5:8.

2. Matt. 26:30

3. Ex. 19:16

4. See Rev. 18 and 19.

5. Rom. 1:18

6. II Kings 23:10

7. Jer. 7:31,32

throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit."<sup>1</sup>

- "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."<sup>2</sup>

- "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'"<sup>3</sup>

- "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out."<sup>4</sup>

- "So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call this place Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter."<sup>5</sup>

v. The fifth woe: all things new (31:1–32:20)

***1 Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD.***

***2 Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster; he does not take back his words. He will rise up against the house of the wicked, against those who help evildoers.***

***3 But the Egyptians are men and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit. When the LORD stretches out his hand, he who helps will stumble, he who is helped will fall; both will perish together.***

***4 This is what the LORD says to me: "As a lion growls, a great lion over his prey — and though a whole band of shepherds is called together against him, he is not frightened by their shouts or disturbed by their clamor — so the LORD Almighty will come down to do battle on Mount Zion and on its heights.***

***5 Like birds hovering overhead, the LORD Almighty will shield Jerusalem; he will shield it and deliver it, he will 'pass over' it and will rescue it."***

***6 Return to him you have so greatly revolted against, O Israelites.***

***7 For in that day every one of you will reject the idols of silver and gold your sinful hands have made.***

***8 "Assyria will fall by a sword that is not of man; a sword, not of mortals, will devour them. They will flee before the sword and their young men will be put to forced labor.***

***9 Their stronghold will fall because of terror; at sight of the battle standard their commanders will panic,"declares the LORD, whose fire is in Zion, whose furnace is in Jerusalem.***

***Chapter 32:1 - See, a king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice.***

***2 Each man will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.***

***3 Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed, and the ears of those who hear will listen.***

***4 The mind of the rash will know and understand, and the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear.***

***5 No longer will the fool be called noble nor the scoundrel be highly respected.***

***6 For the fool speaks folly, his mind is busy with evil: He practices ungodliness and spreads error concerning the LORD; the hungry he leaves empty and from the thirsty he withholds water.***

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1. Isa. 14:12-15

2. Matt. 5:22

3. Matt. 25:41

4. Mark 9:43,44

5. Jer. 19:6

**7 The scoundrel's methods are wicked, he makes up evil schemes to destroy the poor with lies, even when the plea of the needy is just.**

**8 But the noble man makes noble plans, and by noble deeds he stands.**

**9 You women who are so complacent, rise up and listen to me; you daughters who feel secure, hear what I have to say!**

**10 In little more than a year you who feel secure will tremble; the grape harvest will fail, and the harvest of fruit will not come.**

**11 Tremble, you complacent women; shudder, you daughters who feel secure! Strip off your clothes, put sackcloth around your waists.**

**12 Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vines**

**13 and for the land of my people, a land overgrown with thorns and briars — yes, mourn for all houses of merriment and for this city of revelry.**

**14 The fortress will be abandoned, the noisy city deserted; citadel and watchtower will become a wasteland forever, the delight of donkeys, a pasture for flocks,**

**15 till the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest.**

**16 Justice will dwell in the desert and righteousness live in the fertile field.**

**17 The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever.**

**18 My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest.**

**19 Though hail flattens the forest and the city is leveled completely,**

**20 how blessed you will be, sowing your seed by every stream, and letting your cattle and donkeys range free.**

In introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “The second woe was in two parts, for it covered both circumstantial and spiritual problems in the Lord’s people. On the one hand there are the often overwhelming odds which threaten us in this world (29:1–8), and on the other the spiritual blindness which is part of our fallen nature (29:9–14). Over all this the Lord is competent to deliver (even at the eleventh hour) and transform. This matching fifth woe first (31:1–9) sees Judah, Egypt and Assyria embroiled at Jerusalem but observes a fourth ‘component’ enter the scene: the Lord, who will not allow Egypt to help or Assyria to hurt and who carries off Jerusalem as his personal prey (31:4–5; cf. 29:4–6). Isaiah then goes on to a transformation scene matching 29:9–14, the coming King and his renewed people (31:1–20). In slightly closer detail, we start with a ‘prologue’ (29:1–5), which deals with coming disaster and deliverance. This is balanced by an ‘epilogue’ (32:19–20), forecasting disaster and blessedness. The two internal sections are respectively a call to return/repent (31:6 – 32:8), looking forward to the outpouring of the Spirit and a new society.”

The Lord had specifically forbidden Israel to go back to Egypt for anything, especially for acquiring horses. In laying down the constitution for an eventual monarchy, Moses had said: “The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, ‘You are not to go back that way again.’ ”<sup>1</sup> So, in applying to Egypt for military help, especially to build up a cavalry, the people of Judah sinned doubly.

Asking Egypt for help against Assyria was the equivalent of asking the devil’s help to exorcise a demon. The Pharisees accused Jesus of doing this. We read: “But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.’ Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. ‘If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?’ ”<sup>2</sup> In *The Book of Revelation* we see how mankind calls upon the devil for help, which

1. Deut. 17:16

comes in the revelation of the Antichrist.<sup>1</sup> But once Satan and his demons come, they are there to stay and mankind suffers immensely from their presence.<sup>2</sup> To call upon anyone or anything instead of calling upon the Lord is sin; how much more if the help invoked is demonic!

The reason for Judah's invocation of help from Egypt was the Assyrian threat. A few decades earlier Isaiah announced to King Ahaz, who feared that he would be overrun by the northern kingdom of Israel, that God would intervene. Ahaz called upon Assyria to help instead of putting his trust in the Lord.

The Bible does not give us any description of the consultation that must have taken place between the king and his counsellors that resulted in the decision to send envoys to Egypt to ask for help against Assyria. The king's wise men must have told him that such would be the only reasonable thing to do in the light of the Assyrian threat. After pronouncing his "woe" upon those counsellors, the prophet turns to sarcasm: "Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster; he does not take back his words." God's wisdom may not look too wise to us. The human logic seemed to be inescapable that if you are threatened by one superpower you turn to the other. The Apostle Paul assumed the same line of reason in regards to the Gospel as Isaiah does here. We read: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."<sup>3</sup>

In as much as God's promises are reliable (he does not take back his words) so are God's warnings.

V.3 reminds us that the actual warfare is spiritual. Like Isaiah, the Apostle Paul states: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."<sup>4</sup> A lack of understanding at this point can be disastrous. On the other hand, an open eye for this spiritual reality will make a great difference. This point is well illustrated in the story of the siege of Samaria. There was a world of difference in what the prophet Elisha saw and what his servant saw. We read: "When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. 'Oh, my lord, what shall we do?' the servant asked. 'Don't be afraid,' the prophet answered. 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' And Elisha prayed, 'O LORD, open his eyes so he may see.' Then the LORD opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."<sup>5</sup> Our enemy is a spirit. We need a spiritual eye to see reality and we need a spiritual ear to hear what the Holy Spirit says to us.<sup>6</sup>

As God's creatures we all owe our life to God. None of us has life in himself. As the Psalmist says: "When you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust."<sup>7</sup> That is what happened to the Egyptians, to their horses and to those who called upon them for help.

In vv.4 and 5 Isaiah depicts the same scene as what Elisha saw in the siege of Samaria. Only, Isaiah sees God as a lion watching over his prey. Egypt is compared here to a group of shepherds shouting at the lion who pays not the slightest attention to their noise and clamor. If the picture of the lion is one of superior strength, the one of the birds flying overhead seems to be one of weakness. The Hebrew word *tsippowr* means "a little bird," such as a sparrow. The word is used in the Psalm verse: "Even *the sparrow* has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young — a place near your altar, O LORD

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2. Matt. 12:24-26
  1. The seals in Rev. 6.
  2. The trumpets in Rev.9.
  3. I Cor. 1:18,25
  4. Eph. 6:12
  5. II Kings 6:15-17
  6. See Rev. 2:7 and following.
  7. Ps. 104:29

Almighty, my King and my God.”<sup>1</sup> J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states about this image: “Would they have said, ‘About as much use as a sparrow!’? But the weakness of God is stronger than men (1 Cor. 1:25). Gentle towards his erring people as a hovering bird, his is the fourfold strength to *shield, deliver, pass over* and *rescue*. The numeral four symbolizes ‘on every side.’ The hovering God is sufficient.” Our salvation lies in the fact that the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God are one and the same person.<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word “pass over” is the same as the one used at the first Passover in Egypt. God said to Moses: “The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.”<sup>3</sup>

Isaiah sees in the Egyptian alliance an act of great revolt against God. Not to count on the Almighty for protection means revolting against Him.

Shortly after pronouncing the prophecy about the destruction of the Assyrian army, it was fulfilled as is recorded in the books of Second Kings and Second Chronicles: “That night the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning — there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there. One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer cut him down with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king.”<sup>4</sup> “And the LORD sent an angel, who annihilated all the fighting men and the leaders and officers in the camp of the Assyrian king. So he withdrew to his own land in disgrace. And when he went into the temple of his god, some of his sons cut him down with the sword. So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from the hand of all others. He took care of them on every side.”<sup>5</sup>

As stated above, most Bible scholars understand the statement in v.9: “the LORD, whose fire is in Zion, whose furnace is in Jerusalem” to mean that Jerusalem became King Sennacherib’s funeral pyre.

The Scripture’s testimony about King Hezekiah is very positive. We read: “He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done.”<sup>6</sup> This statement is made only of two of the kings who reigned in Jerusalem. Before Hezekiah, King Amaziah received the same recommendation.<sup>7</sup> When the angel Gabriel visited Mary to give her the message that she would become pregnant with Jesus, he said: “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”<sup>8</sup> This is the king whose arrival Isaiah announces in Chapter Thirty-two. Neither Amaziah nor Hezekiah reigned eternally on David’s throne. And even today, Jesus Christ has not ascended David’s throne yet. Isaiah’s vision, as expressed in this chapter, has cosmic proportions. It spans the centuries of God’s plan with His creation. It is as if Isaiah draws a line from his day, a day in which the Assyrian superpower threatened the throne of King Hezekiah, to heaven to the throne of God. The result of this is that heavenly light shines upon a situation on earth that seems to be desperate. Hezekiah and his ministers were so frantic that they decided to make this pact with Egypt. The heavenly light that shines upon Isaiah reveals not only the foolishness of such an act but also the perfection of God’s eternal plan. We learn from Hezekiah’s biography in Scripture that the king never got the complete picture.

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1. Ps. 84:3  
 2. See Rev. 5:5,6.  
 3. Ex. 12:13  
 4. II Kings 19:35-37

5. II Chron 32:21,22  
 6. II Kings 18:3  
 7. See II Kings 14:1-3.  
 8. Luke 1:32,33

Vv.1 and 2 of chapter thirty-two announce the coming reign of the Messiah. The way *The New International Version* reads v.2, “each man” gives the impression that His reign will transform every individual and make him or her a symbol of protection. The Hebrew text reads literally “a man.” This may be read as an emphasis on the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His ascension to the throne of David, His human nature will be demonstrated, rather than His divinity. In a way such an emphasis narrows the distance between Him and us. It brings His victory within our reach. It allows us to share in His reign and to sit with Him on His throne. As such “each man” is an acceptable translation.

Isaiah’s poetry in these verses sounds like music; but that is what all poetry ought to sound like. The protection and refreshment in v.2 speak as much about the hardship of life on earth as about God’s solutions to our problems. The strength of the shelter is needed because of the strength of the storm that rages over us, and the water in the desert highlights the dread of the thirst of our souls that needs the living water to stay alive.

It seems that vv.3 and 4 are God’s answer to Israel’s hardened condition predicted earlier in Isaiah’s prophecy. When God called Isaiah, He gave him the message to pass on to the people: “ ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”<sup>1</sup> The coming of the Messiah will bring healing for physical as well as for spiritual blindness and deafness.

Vv. 5-8, while predicting the changes God’s healing will bring to His people, depict the present condition of a society that is blind to God’s revelation and deaf to His Word. *The Living Bible’s* paraphrase of these verses reads: “In those days the ungodly, the atheists, will not be heroes! Wealthy cheaters will not be spoken of as generous, outstanding men! Everyone will recognize an evil man when he sees him, and hypocrites will fool no one at all. Their lies about God and their cheating of the hungry will be plain for all to see. The smooth tricks of evil men will be exposed, as will all the lies they use to oppress the poor in the courts. But good men will be generous to others and will be blessed of God for all they do.” A person who spreads wrong information about God, who practices evil, is a fool in God’s sight. The Hebrew word rendered “fool” is *nabal*, which has the meaning of “stupid,” or “wicked.” *The King James Version* uses the term “vile person.” Those who think the cross of Christ to be foolishness<sup>2</sup> are fools in the eyes of God.

If the result of people’s foolishness is social injustice, those who are wise in the eyes of God will promote justice.

In vv.9-14 Isaiah singles out the women of Jerusalem as an influence for evil in society. Moses predicted the hardship that would fall upon the people when they refused to obey the will of God. After predicting that the Israelites would turn into cannibals, eating their own children, he said: “The most gentle and sensitive woman among you — so sensitive and gentle that she would not venture to touch the ground with the sole of her foot — will begrudge the husband she loves and her own son or daughter the afterbirth from her womb and the children she bears. For she intends to eat them secretly during the siege and in the distress that your enemy will inflict on you in your cities.”<sup>3</sup> Isaiah calls these women “complacent.” This is the translation of the Hebrew word *sha’anan*, which means “secure in a bad sense.” It conveys a sense of insolence. The Word of God affected them as water slides off of a duck’s back. At the high price of injustice and cruelty, these ladies had built up a fortress of ease and comfort, a life of little undisturbed routines that could never be disturbed, or so they thought. In a less civilized manner, Amos condemned the women of Samaria, saying: “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, ‘Bring us some drinks!’ The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his holiness: ‘The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks. You will each go straight out through breaks in the wall, and you will be cast out toward

1. Isa. 6:9,10

2. See I Cor. 1:18 ff.

3. Deut. 28:56,57

Harmon,' declares the LORD."<sup>1</sup> None of these prophecies are a condemnation of womanhood. The woman according to God's heart is one of the greatest masterpieces of creation. The Apostle Peter calls this "the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight."<sup>2</sup> The corruption of this beauty, however, is the worst kind imaginable.

Isaiah calls upon the women of Jerusalem to repent and to demonstrate their repentance by taking off their expensive clothing and covering themselves with sackcloth. "Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vines" follows the Greek translation of *The Septuagint*. The Hebrew text reads literally: "They shall lament for the teats, for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vine." Evidently, the verbs in vv.11 and 12 are difficult to analyze. Some are put in their masculine form and applied to female nouns. J. Alec Motyer, in a footnote in his *Isaiah*, states: "There may be nothing more here than Isaiah failing to maintain the fiction of addressing the women when his words apply to all." *Barnes' Notes* supposes "that the word breasts here is used to denote that which nourishes or sustains life, and is synonymous with fruitful fields." This seems to make the most sense to me.

In a literal and physical sense, the land of Israel has never become "a wasteland forever," as v.14 states. Even during and after the Babylonian captivity this never occurred. We could see in the destruction of the citadel and watchtower a prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar, but the mention of the watchtower draws a picture of the Lord's vineyard, which suggests a deeper and more spiritual application of the image. The outpouring of God's Holy Spirit, as promised in the next verse, will only be upon hearts that are broken, in which all resistance has ceased. The Apostle Paul explains the purpose of his methods of evangelism in terms of breaking down walls of opposition. We read: "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete."<sup>3</sup>

The new birth generated by the Holy Spirit in the heart of a person will only occur in lives that resemble a bombed out city, a pile of rubble. The word "till" in v.15 modifies the "forever" in the previous verse.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* comments on Isaiah's prediction of the Spirit being poured out upon the people: "This can only partially apply to the spiritual revival in Hezekiah's time; its full accomplishment belongs to the Christian dispensation, first at Pentecost (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17), perfectly in coming times (Ps 104:30; Ezek 36:26; 39:29; Zech 12:10), when the Spirit shall be poured on Israel, and through it on the Gentiles (Mic 5:7)."

The verses quoted read: "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions."<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:17 gives Peter's quotation of the same verse at the day of Pentecost. "When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth."<sup>5</sup> " 'I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will no longer hide my face from them, for I will pour out my Spirit on the house of Israel,' declares the Sovereign LORD." "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son."<sup>6</sup> "The remnant of Jacob will be in the midst of many

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1. Amos 4:1-3
  2. I Peter 3:4
  3. II Cor. 10:4-6
  4. Joel 2:28
  5. Ps. 104:30
  6. Zech. 12:10

peoples like dew from the LORD, like showers on the grass, which do not wait for man or linger for mankind.”<sup>1</sup>

As elsewhere in his book, Isaiah goes back and forth between the physical images and the spiritual reality they represent. As a desert will sprout out overnight when hit by an atypical rainstorm, so the parched soul of humanity will bloom and bear fruit when the Holy Spirit rains down upon it. The righteousness, that is God’s righteousness applied to human lives, will produce “shalom,” quietness and confidence. The latter is the rendering of the Hebrew word *betach*, which literally means “a place of refuge.”

Vv.19 and 20 contrast the harsh outward realities of a world dominated by war and violence with the inward peace of the child of God. The forest is cut down and the city is in ruin, but the believer in God is blessed with all God’s blessings in heavenly places.

vi. The sixth woe: home at last (33:1–35:10)

*1 Woe to you, O destroyer, you who have not been destroyed! Woe to you, O traitor, you who have not been betrayed! When you stop destroying, you will be destroyed; when you stop betraying, you will be betrayed.*

*2 O LORD, be gracious to us; we long for you. Be our strength every morning, our salvation in time of distress.*

*3 At the thunder of your voice, the peoples flee; when you rise up, the nations scatter.*

*4 Your plunder, O nations, is harvested as by young locusts; like a swarm of locusts men pounce on it.*

*5 The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness.*

*6 He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure.*

*7 Look, their brave men cry aloud in the streets; the envoys of peace weep bitterly.*

*8 The highways are deserted, no travelers are on the roads. The treaty is broken, its witnesses are despised, no one is respected.*

*9 The land mourns and wastes away, Lebanon is ashamed and withers; Sharon is like the Arabah, and Bashan and Carmel drop their leaves.*

*10 "Now will I arise," says the LORD. "Now will I be exalted; now will I be lifted up.*

*11 You conceive chaff, you give birth to straw; your breath is a fire that consumes you.*

*12 The peoples will be burned as if to lime; like cut thornbushes they will be set ablaze."*

*13 You who are far away, hear what I have done; you who are near, acknowledge my power!*

*14 The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: "Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?"*

*15 He who walks righteously and speaks what is right, who rejects gain from extortion and keeps his hand from accepting bribes, who stops his ears against plots of murder and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil —*

*16 this is the man who will dwell on the heights, whose refuge will be the mountain fortress. His bread will be supplied, and water will not fail him.*

*17 Your eyes will see the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar.*

*18 In your thoughts you will ponder the former terror: "Where is that chief officer? Where is the one who took the revenue? Where is the officer in charge of the towers?"*

*19 You will see those arrogant people no more, those people of an obscure speech, with their strange, incomprehensible tongue.*

*20 Look upon Zion, the city of our festivals; your eyes will see Jerusalem, a peaceful abode, a tent that will not be moved; its stakes will never be pulled up, nor any of its ropes broken.*

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1. Micah 5:7

*21 There the LORD will be our Mighty One. It will be like a place of broad rivers and streams. No galley with oars will ride them, no mighty ship will sail them.*

*22 For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us.*

*23 Your rigging hangs loose: The mast is not held secure, the sail is not spread. Then an abundance of spoils will be divided and even the lame will carry off plunder.*

*24 No one living in Zion will say, "I am ill"; and the sins of those who dwell there will be forgiven.*

*Chapter 34:1 Come near, you nations, and listen; pay attention, you peoples! Let the earth hear, and all that is in it, the world, and all that comes out of it!*

*2 The LORD is angry with all nations; his wrath is upon all their armies. He will totally destroy them, he will give them over to slaughter.*

*3 Their slain will be thrown out, their dead bodies will send up a stench; the mountains will be soaked with their blood.*

*4 All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree.*

*5 My sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; see, it descends in judgment on Edom, the people I have totally destroyed.*

*6 The sword of the LORD is bathed in blood, it is covered with fat — the blood of lambs and goats, fat from the kidneys of rams. For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah and a great slaughter in Edom.*

*7 And the wild oxen will fall with them, the bull calves and the great bulls. Their land will be drenched with blood, and the dust will be soaked with fat.*

*8 For the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution, to uphold Zion's cause.*

*9 Edom's streams will be turned into pitch, her dust into burning sulfur; her land will become blazing pitch!*

*10 It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever. From generation to generation it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again.*

*11 The desert owl and screech owl will possess it; the great owl and the raven will nest there. God will stretch out over Edom the measuring line of chaos and the plumb line of desolation.*

*12 Her nobles will have nothing there to be called a kingdom, all her princes will vanish away.*

*13 Thorns will overrun her citadels, nettles and brambles her strongholds. She will become a haunt for jackals, a home for owls.*

*14 Desert creatures will meet with hyenas, and wild goats will bleat to each other; there the night creatures will also repose and find for themselves places of rest.*

*15 The owl will nest there and lay eggs, she will hatch them, and care for her young under the shadow of her wings; there also the falcons will gather, each with its mate.*

*16 Look in the scroll of the LORD and read: None of these will be missing, not one will lack her mate. For it is his mouth that has given the order, and his Spirit will gather them together.*

*17 He allots their portions; his hand distributes them by measure. They will possess it forever and dwell there from generation to generation.*

*Chapter 35:1 The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus,*

*2 it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.*

*3 Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;*

*4 say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."*

*5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.*

*6 Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.*

**7 The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.**

**8 And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it.**

**9 No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there,**

**10 and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.**

By way of introduction to this sixth woe, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “The balanced presentation of the six woes continues into this final one. First, the matching third woe (29:15–24) was wholly visionary and eschatological, as is also this one. Historical events can be read between the lines, but our eyes are held all the time by the undated future. Amongst many similarities between these two passages we may note the Lebanon theme (29:17; 33:9; 35:2), the blind and deaf (29:18; 35:5), redemption (29:22; 35:9–10) and spiritual transformation (29:24; 33:24; 35:8). The main thrust of the third woe was the transformation of the world and of ‘Jacob.’ And both these lines are now further developed in typical Old Testament ways. Secondly, this sixth woe continues from the fifth. In brief, the royal theme (32:1) is developed in chapter 33; the allusion to disaster preceding the great dawn of light (32:19) is the ‘text’ for chapter 34, and the blessings in environment and life awaiting the Lord’s people (32:15–18) are beautifully expressed in chapter 35. As a simple outline of the contents of these chapters we can consider 33:1–12 as a prologue, sketching the salvation of Zion (1–6) and the judgment of the people (7–12). Then there are two universal proclamations (33:13; 34:1), the first dealing with Zion and its king (33:13–24), and the second with the final overthrow (34:1–17); lastly, there is an epilogue: the pilgrimage of the redeemed through a renewed world to Zion (35:1–10).”

Bible scholars agree unanimously that the destroyer and the traitor in 33:1 is Assyria. Some believe that it refers to Assyria’s failure to honor its pact with King Ahaz. We have no scriptural evidence that this is not so, but it is not unreasonable to assume that the king of Assyria may have had traitors among the Israelites. The historical evidence, however, points to King Sennecherib’s treachery in accepting Hezekiah’s apology with the accompanying payment and then threatening the capture of Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the spiritual truth remains that the enemy has his spies in each one of us. There is, even in the heart of every believer, a “fifth column” that responds when enticed to sin.

In introducing the section that begins with v.2 *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The mingling of prayer with prophecy is very unusual, and indicative of highly excited feeling. Isaiah realizes fully the danger of his people and nation, and knows that without prayer there is no deliverance. His prayer is at once an outpouring of his own heart, and an example to others.”

The background of Isaiah’s prayer is undoubtedly the Assyrian assault on Jerusalem. Whether it was offered before the Lord’s intervention that broke the siege, or afterward is not clear. The Hebrew text of v.2 reads literally: “O LORD, be gracious to us; we have waited for you: you be their arm every morning, also our salvation in time of trouble.” The arm of God is usually mentioned in connection with salvation, as in the verse: “Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.’ ”<sup>2</sup> Although the defeat of the Assyrian army occurred quietly during the night,<sup>3</sup> Isaiah depicts it as the thunder of God’s voice. It is true that King Sennecherib got the message loud and clear!

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1. See II Kings 18:14-36.

2. Ex. 6:6

3. See II Kings 19:35,36.

Vv.5 and 6 contain a message that carries well beyond the days of King Hezekiah. The defeat of Assyria, foretold in v.4, was a small token of the great deliverance that will come upon this earth at the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. As believers in God we ought to have the same fear, although in a different sense, that the Assyrians had when they fled for the God who lived in Jerusalem. As *The New International Version* states: “the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure.” The Hebrew text reads: “The fear of the LORD [is] his treasure.”

The broken treaty, mentioned in v.8, could refer to the alliance with Egypt, but it probably relates to the Assyrian treachery. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: “But what thus happened in connection with Assyria is no more than a reflection of the End. Humankind’s effort by strength and wisdom to organize the world without God will end in collapse, strength exhausted (7a), wisdom baffled (7b), the busy world hushed (8ab), moral values rubbished (8c) ... In pursuit of world dominion Assyria left a trail of destruction. At the End, the determination to create world order, a world city (24:10) on human principles, will crash, and human life itself be discounted (8d). Finally (9) what started with the thorns of Genesis 3:18 will end with the withering of all nature. *Lebanon* typifies the permanent, what has always been; *Sharon*, the beautiful; *Bashan*, the fertile; and *Carmel*, the ‘garden land,’ planned and ordered.”

God’s arising, as stated in v.10 was the immediate result of King Sennecherib’s insinuations that the God of Israel was the same kind of deity as the idols the heathen nations were worshipping. In a message sent through his ambassadors, he said: “Do not listen to Hezekiah, for he is misleading you when he says, ‘The LORD will deliver us.’ Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?”<sup>1</sup> And in a later letter sent to Hezekiah, he stated: “Say to Hezekiah king of Judah: Do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says, ‘Jerusalem will not be handed over to the king of Assyria.’ Surely you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the countries, destroying them completely. And will you be delivered? Did the gods of the nations that were destroyed by my forefathers deliver them: the gods of Gozan, Haran, Rezepth and the people of Eden who were in Tel Assar? Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, or of Hena or Ivvah?”<sup>2</sup>

King Hezekiah had reacted to both messages by passing the word on to God. The letter Sennecherib sent became his suicide note. In the message Hezekiah sent to Isaiah, he said: “This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver them.”<sup>3</sup> God answered that the Assyrians were worse off in their “pregnancy”: “You conceive chaff, you give birth to straw; your breath is a fire that consumes you.” *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* comments on the images of lime and briars: “The first simile sets forth the totality of the destruction: they will be so completely burned up, that nothing but ashes will be left, like the lump of lime left at the burning of lime. The second contains a figurative description of its suddenness: they have vanished suddenly, like dead brushwood, which is cut down in consequence, and quickly crackles up and is consumed.”

But the Word of God is a double-edged sharp sword. The Assyrians were like straw and set themselves on fire, but there were also “straw believers” in Jerusalem. God’s message is to “you who are far away,” and “you who are near.” The destruction of the Assyrian army was also meant to bring about conviction of sin among the population of Jerusalem. Although King Hezekiah had demonstrated faith in God’s deliverance, the whole population did not evince the same trust in the Lord. The author of Hebrew gives us a reason for our fear of the Lord: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be

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1. II Kings 18:32-35
  2. II Kings 19:10-13
  3. II Kings 19:3

shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on the words in v.14: “Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?” stating: “*Burning* is translated ‘altar hearth’ in Leviticus 6:9 and therefore has the same significance as Ariel (29:1). There is always fire burning on the Lord’s altar to proclaim the presence of the Holy One. This fire is a threat (*consuming*) and a changeless reality (*everlasting*).” God’s answer to this question is the same as He gave to David, who asked: “LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?”<sup>2</sup>

As Motyer points out, the consuming fire is the fire that burns on God’s altar. God’s altar is the cross of Calvary, where Jesus became “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”<sup>3</sup> Righteousness and holiness are not preconditions to approach the altar of God; they are the results. If Jesus’ sacrifice does not produce righteousness and holiness in us, the fire will become our funeral pyre as it did for the Assyrians. If we say we believe in Jesus’ death on the cross on our behalf and we live a life of unrighteousness, we lie, we take bribes and we become accomplices in murder, we will play with fire and we will burn ourselves beyond hope. If the death of Christ transforms us, God guarantees to supply our needs, both spiritually and physically: “His bread will be supplied, and water will not fail him.”

V.17 – “Your eyes will see the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar.” To see in this prophetic utterance anything else than a reference to the Messiah does not seem to make much sense. Yet, some Bible scholars believe that it refers to King Hezekiah, some even to Sennacherib. The people are reminded of the scene that was still fresh in their minds, of the bragging Assyrians shouting their taunts and insults to the people on the walls of Jerusalem. The Assyrian commander, who spoke Hebrew to Hezekiah’s ministers and the people on the wall, who told them that they would come to the point of eating their own excrements and drinking their own urine,<sup>4</sup> was dead. The whole Assyrian army had been defeated in one single night without one arrow being shot. God had saved His people. But this was only an illustration of the glorious things to come.

As Jesus did at several instances, Isaiah draws a line from a present situation on earth to a point of reference in heaven and he invites the people to readjust their focus. After hearing the testimony of a Roman Centurion, Jesus said: “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”<sup>5</sup> Isaiah says to the people of his day: “You have seen what God can do to save you? You haven’t seen half of it yet!” In times of trouble or victory it is good to focus our eyes on the beauty of the coming King. John saw Him and said: “His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.”<sup>6</sup> We will need new eyes to be able to stand the reality of this vision.

With the vision of the King is the vision of the heavenly country. Isaiah’s words remind us of the end of Moses’ life. Moses was not allowed to enter Canaan, but God allowed him a preview. We read: “On that same day the LORD told Moses, ‘Go up into the Abarim Range to Mount Nebo in Moab, across from Jericho, and view Canaan, the land I am giving the Israelites as their own possession.’ ”<sup>7</sup> But the glance Isaiah invited the people to take was into the reality of God’s rest of which Canaan, the Promised Land, was

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1. Heb. 12:28,29

2. See Ps. 15.

3. John 1:29

4. See II Kings 18:26,27.

5. Matt. 8:10-12

6. Rev. 1:16,17

7. Deut. 32:48,49

but an image. David had prayed for this vision when he wrote in one of his psalms: “One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.”<sup>1</sup>

This heavenly vision is further elaborated on in vv.20-22. Jerusalem here is the heavenly city, the one John saw, of which he said: “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” And: “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.”<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah invites us on a pilgrimage. As the people would travel to Jerusalem to celebrate their yearly feasts, so we travel to our eternal destination. Moses had commanded the Israelites: “Three times a year all your men must appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles. No man should appear before the LORD empty-handed: Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you.”<sup>3</sup> This made Zion “the city of your festivals.”

The reference to Jerusalem as “a tent that will not be moved” evokes the image of the desert crossing. The tent symbolized the transient character of life on earth. The Israelites lived in tents because they were on their way to a destination, to a place God prepared for them. The Apostle Paul equates the human body, that which is mortal in us, with a tent. He writes: “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.”<sup>4</sup> The New Jerusalem is not just a place we travel to, we are it: the bride of the Lamb. It is not only where we will be, it is what we will be.

The mention of a galley ship seems puzzling. This is the only place where Isaiah uses the Hebrew word *‘oniy*. We find it elsewhere in reference to the fleet King Solomon built. We read: “King Solomon also built *ships* at Ezion Geber, which is near Elath in Edom, on the shore of the Red Sea. And Hiram sent his men — sailors who knew the sea — to serve in the fleet with Solomon’s men.”<sup>5</sup> There is no Scriptural record that the Assyrian attack, or any other, came by sea. *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* explains about the streams: “The word *y<sup>a</sup>oriym* was an Egyptian word, that had become naturalized in Hebrew; nevertheless it is a very natural supposition, that the prophet was thinking of the No of Egypt, which was surrounded by waters, probably Nile-canals ... The adjective in which *yâdaim* brings out with greater force the idea of breadth.” The picture of the large rivers that surround or cross the city gives way to the thought that ships could sail on it. This is obviously the connection with the galley ships mentioned. The suggestion in the galley is war. These ships used slaves as oarsmen as well as sails. The best interpretation may be that the city is perfectly safe and protected against attack in any form. When the New Jerusalem descends from heaven evil and death will have been thrown in the lake of fire.<sup>6</sup> God will be at the center as judge, lawgiver, king and savior. His presence is eternal protection.

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1. Ps. 27:4
  2. Rev. 21:2, 9-11
  3. Deut. 16:16,17
  4. II Cor. 5:1-4
  5. I Kings 9:26,27
  6. Rev. 19:20; 20:10,14

Before the end of this chapter Isaiah takes a last look at Judah, “the ship of state” that is in need of repair and salvation. The ship is broken and powerless. As in the crucifixion, it seems that everything is lost. The only thing visible is the broken body of Jesus Christ. But the gain of this brokenness is so great that “even the lame will carry off plunder.” “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength!”<sup>1</sup> No one whose sins are forgiven is lame.

V.24 shows that the fruit of God’s “foolishness” and “weakness” is forgiveness and healing. This verse does more than establish a relationship between physical healing and forgiveness of sin. It reveals the foundation of the New Jerusalem. There is healing power in God’s forgiveness. David establishes this relationship between forgiveness and healing, saying: “I said, ‘O LORD, have mercy on me; heal me, for I have sinned against you.’”<sup>2</sup> And he praises God “who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases.”<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word, rendered “forgiven” is *nasa*. It has a rich variety of meaning, the basic one of which is “to lift.” The most significant use of this word is found in the verse: “When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites — all their sins — and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will *carry* on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.”<sup>4</sup> God heals by means of “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”<sup>5</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces chapter 34 with: “Following the call to nations and people to listen (1), Isaiah announced the Lord’s anger against earth and heaven (2–4), the Lord’s sword falling on Edom (5–6d), the Lord’s sacrifice in Edom (6e–7), and the Lord’s vengeance on behalf of Zion (8–10b). In the Hebrew each of these divisions opens with ‘For’ and each announces its topic in matching words: The Lord ‘has indignation’ (2), ‘has a sword’ (6), ‘has a sacrifice’ (6e), ‘has a day’ (8).”

It is important to note that the convocation to all the nations of the world to come and listen is issued before the execution of the verdict. God’s purpose in announcing judgment is always to leave the door open to repentance. The story of Jonah illustrates this. The whole of creation, the world and all its inhabitants is called to pay attention to the announcement of the revelation of God’s wrath. God tells Isaiah to paint a picture of total destruction so that the people would step back in horror and change their behavior. The Hebrew word *charam*, rendered “destroy,” refers to a ban. In a footnote, *The New International Version* states: “The Hebrew term refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the LORD, often by totally destroying them; also in verse 5.” The picture shows the battlefield several days after the war with the bodies of the slain decomposing. It is death in its most nauseating form. Important are the words “he will give them over.” God does not actively do this Himself but He allows it to happen. Man kills man and God lets them be. Speaking about the revelation of God’s wrath, the Apostle Paul states: “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts.”<sup>6</sup> God’s wrath demonstrates itself in withholding protection.

Isaiah’s words in v.4 correspond with John’s vision of the opening of the sixth seal. We read: “I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and

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1. I Cor. 1:25
  2. Ps. 41:4
  3. Ps. 103:3
  4. Lev. 16:20-22
  5. John 1:29
  6. Rom. 1:24

island was removed from its place.”<sup>1</sup> This disintegration of the universe is obviously the end of creation, as we know it.

The very thought that our planet will not continue to exist in its present form and that we will not live on earth eternally is a sobering one. It reminds us of our accountability. There will be a day of judgment on which our lives will be scrutinized and we will have to answer for our acts. God predicts that a large section of mankind will not survive this test. Many will receive a death sentence that is carried out in the form of a war in which humans kill another. It will be war in its worst form in which the dead bodies will not be buried but left to rot. This Armageddon will be too much for the universe to bear. As the land vomits up its immoral inhabitants<sup>2</sup> so the whole of creation will collapse.

In this prophecy the focal point of God’s wrath is Edom because of its attitude toward Israel in times of trouble. Ezekiel’s prophecy speaks of Edom’s sin against Israel. We read: “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘Because Edom took revenge on the house of Judah and became very guilty by doing so, therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will stretch out my hand against Edom and kill its men and their animals. I will lay it waste, and from Teman to Dedan they will fall by the sword. I will take vengeance on Edom by the hand of my people Israel, and they will deal with Edom in accordance with my anger and my wrath; they will know my vengeance, declares the Sovereign LORD.’ ”<sup>3</sup> And the Psalmist exclaims: “Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. ‘Tear it down,’ they cried, ‘tear it down to its foundations!’ ”<sup>4</sup> Edom’s quarrel with Israel was more than a war between two neighboring countries; it was symbolic for man’s resistance against God’s revelation. Edom’s father, Esau, sold his birthright to Jacob. He was not interested in God’s blessing.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on this point: “Obadiah saw Edom as both a place and a symbol: meriting judgment in its own right but also picturing the judgment which would mark the Day of the Lord. He was not innovating: in Psalms 60:8; 83:6, Edom had already a symbolic place in the theme of hostility to Zion. Two factors make Edom specially fit to stand as a motif for the whole world in the final judgment: first, its ceaseless hostility to the Lord’s people, and secondly the fact that it was only to David that it ever really succumbed. Thus Ezekiel, foreseeing the coming David (34:23), moves immediately to the conquest of Edom (35:1–15). Isaiah stands in this same tradition by following his forecast of the King (ch. 33) with the rout of Edom in the final judgment (*cf.* 11:14; 63:1–6). Recollecting 29:22 and the establishing of the family of Jacob, the overthrow of Edom/Esau makes the End the exact fulfillment of the beginning (Gn. 25:23). The purposes of God according to election stand.”

V.5 reads: “My sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; see, it descends in judgment on Edom, the people I have totally destroyed.” *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “This passage has given much perplexity to commentators, on account of the apparent want of meaning of the expression that the sword would be bathed in heaven.” *The Commentary* continues: “The Hebrew word *riv<sup>a</sup>taah* ... means properly to drink to the full; to be satisfied, or sated with drink; and then to be full or satiated with intoxicating liquor, to be drunk. It is applied to the sword, as satiated or made drunk with blood.”

A problem of interpretation obviously occurs when the words are taken literally. Since Edom was a place on earth, the extermination of Edom must take place on earth. The words remind us of Paul’s statement: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”<sup>5</sup> The course of life on earth is determined by what happens in heaven. But also, the

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1. Rev. 6:12-14
  2. See Lev. 18:28.
  3. Ezek. 25:12-14
  4. Ps. 137:7
  5. Eph. 6:10-12

heavenly scene is influenced by human choices and acts on earth. Paul's advice to put on the full armor would otherwise be futile. Job's story indicates that there is a relationship between what happens in heaven and on earth. This does not mean that human behavior is governed by the stars, but that events that occur in heaven cast their shadow upon the earth.

Some Bible scholars make a distinction between God Himself and His sword as His means of execution. If the sword is seen as God's Word, which is the way in which Scripture represents it consistently, we can hardly make this separation. That the sword of the Lord is the Word of God is obvious from the following verse: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."<sup>1</sup> Seeing the risen Christ, John states: "In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."<sup>2</sup> Also: "Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations."<sup>3</sup>

God's judgments are spiritual. The killing of bodies is not the actual judgment. The death of the body is the result of destruction of the soul. We tend to think that physical death is the worst part; spiritual death is by far the worst. Jesus says: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell."<sup>4</sup>

The mention of the sacrifice in vv.6 and 7 is the most fascinating part of this prophecy. Every sacrifice is a substitution. In the Old Testament the animal takes the place of the human being who is condemned to death. Even if a man dies sacrificially it is for the benefit of someone else. The fact that God has a sacrifice in Bozrah means that Edom ought not to die for its own sins. Their rejection of God's provision would be their annihilation, but that is not what God wanted it to be. An example is in what God said to Cain before he murdered his brother. "Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.'"<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew word rendered "sin" is *chatta'ah* which means "an offence," but it can also mean "a sacrifice." God offered Cain a way out for his sins and his anger, but he refused.

The impression given in these verses, however, is not one of reconciliation but of vengeance. God's offer of appeasement is two-sided. Refusal to accept God's terms has fatal consequences. The drenching of Edom's soil with blood seems to indicate that the sacrifice that was meant for salvation became the means of condemnation. Condemnation is not on the basis of sin but of refusal to believe and accept. Jesus said: "When [the Holy Spirit] comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned."<sup>6</sup> For Edom, the message of the cross was a smell of death.<sup>7</sup>

God's day of vengeance upon Edom foreshadows the day of final judgment upon all of creation. Edom is turned into the lake of fire in which Satan and all who belong to him will spend eternity in separation from God. The description of what Edom will look like after judgment equals what Isaiah prophesied earlier over Babylon. "She will never be inhabited or lived in through all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherd will rest his flocks there. But desert creatures will lie there, jackals will

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1. Heb. 4:12,13
  2. Rev. 1:16
  3. Rev. 19:15
  4. Matt. 10:28
  5. Gen. 4:6,7
  6. John 16:8-11
  7. See II Cor. 2:15,16.

fill her houses; there the owls will dwell, and there the wild goats will leap about. Hyenas will howl in her strongholds, jackals in her luxurious palaces. Her time is at hand, and her days will not be prolonged.”<sup>1</sup> The use of the same language in describing two different countries that were the object of God’s wrath suggests that the intent is symbolic more than literal. Edom on earth never became the ever-burning place Isaiah describes here. War may have turned the land into a scorched earth, but that is not the same.

The Lord invites us to “look in the scroll of the LORD and read” to see the confirmation of the accuracy of this prediction. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “There is no other passage of Scripture to which appeal may be made.” If Isaiah refers here to an existing book of which we have no knowledge, we have no way of understanding what he means. Some Bible scholars believe that the prophet speaks of his own writings that could be consulted after the prediction became fact. A preferable interpretation, in my opinion, is to see this as a reference to Scripture as a whole. And as we saw above, Edom is here symbolic for God’s final judgment upon creation; the whole of Scripture certainly testifies to this.

Chapter Thirty-five with its glorious description of a blooming desert stands in sharp contrast to the wasteland depicted in the previous chapter. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: “In the matching third woe there was an understated reference to redemption (29:22). It is now the climax to the whole series, expressed in one of the most beautiful poems ever written. It is an exodus-based poem. Pilgrims through a desert land (1–2) find that their bleak environment changes for them – and exults to do so (2b!) The pilgrims themselves, however (3–4), are under oppression, just as the exodus people were, but they are summoned to fortitude in full confidence of divine salvation. In verses 5–7, they are once again in the desert, but this time, not only is it being transformed for their benefit (6c–7) but there is another transformation also: the pilgrims are renewed for their journey (5–6ab). Their salvation has been accomplished. Now a clear highway lies before them (8a), a raised causeway. It is only for the holy (8bc); it is unmistakably clear (8e) and free of danger (9). Thus, at length, the Lord’s redeemed arrive with joy in Zion (10).”

The desert in Isaiah’s poem is personified and endowed with emotions. This is not only a poetical feature, but also a thing that is common in all of Scripture. Moses addressed the earth as a person, capable to hear and understand: “Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth.”<sup>2</sup> The Psalmist sings: “Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and all that move in them.”<sup>3</sup> The relationship between man and earth goes back to the day of creation when God took dust and made a human being out of it.<sup>4</sup> The earth, when God created it, was not a desert but a paradise. It was man’s sin that turned paradise into the wasteland that Moses called “the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions.”<sup>5</sup> If man’s fall made God’s creation into a desert, man’s salvation will make it into the place Isaiah describes here. The Apostle Paul corroborates this, saying: “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”<sup>6</sup> It is about this liberation from bondage that Isaiah sings here. The earth will burst out in bloom again because of the salvation obtained by Jesus’ death on the cross.

The flower that represents this miracle is called in Hebrew *chabatstseleth*. It is not certain which flower is meant. The word only occurs two times in the Old Testament, here and in the Song of Songs: “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys.”<sup>7</sup> In *The Septuagint* the flower is called a lily. *Barnes’ Notes* speaks in

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1. See Isa. 13:20-22.
  2. Deut. 32:1
  3. Ps. 69:34
  4. See Gen. 2:7.
  5. Deut. 8:15
  6. Rom. 8:19-21

favor of the rose, stating: “The Syriac renders it also by a word which signifies the lily or narcissus; or, according to the Syriac lexicographers, ‘the meadow-saffron,’ an autumnal flower springing from poisonous bulbous roots, and of a white and violet color. The sense is not, however, affected materially whatever be the meaning of the word. Either the rose, the lily, or the saffron, would convey the idea of beauty compared with the solitude and desolation of the desert. The word ‘rose’ with us, as being a flower better known, conveys a more striking image of beauty, and there is no impropriety in retaining it.” Almost any flower would do to express the beauty and freshness of salvation and renewal. God expressed the glory of His character nowhere better than in the forms, colors and scent of His flowers. Flowers are God’s poetry.

The glory of the Lebanon speaks of another kind of beauty. Flowers are fragile and temporary. Elsewhere in Scripture they symbolize the transitory character of life. “As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”<sup>1</sup> The cedar-covered mountains of Lebanon and the majesty of Mount Carmel represent beauty in its permanence as a picture of eternity.

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, interestingly, sees in Isaiah’s words a picture of the spiritual renewal of the born again believer. We read: “In stark contrast to the future of the unrepentant, God-defying world stands the future of the people of God. 1,2. The blossoming of desert vegetation symbolizes the inward change that takes place in the redeemed soul. Instead of arid fruitlessness and spiritual death comes the fair bloom of newly blossoming faith and the more matured grandeur of the cedars of Lebanon. The redeemed will, in a measure, reflect the glory of the Savior who has appeared for their redemption.” Although this is obviously not the primary message of this section, the application is appropriate.

The picture of vv.1 and 2 is given to us for our encouragement. As sinful human beings who bear responsibility for turning God’s beautiful creation into a desert, we limp through life with fearful hearts. In Paul’s version in Romans the salvation of man causes creation’s hope for renewal. Isaiah presents the renewal of creation as a cause of hope for mankind. The writer of Hebrews, in quoting Isaiah’s words, places them in the context of God’s discipline for the sons He leads on the way to glory. “Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.”<sup>2</sup> Hebrews puts Isaiah’s words in perspective. The path to glory leads through the desert. Circumstances are always against us on our way to heaven. Our hearts tend to be fearful, our knees buckle and our hands grow weak. God wants Isaiah to show us the picture of the blooming desert for our encouragement and, according to Hebrews, to teach us discipline. The two go hand in hand. The fact that we came into this world with a sinful nature requires that we be taught by correction. But even without taking sin into account, obedience does not come to us naturally. Adam and Eve were not created with preprogrammed obedience; otherwise the fall would not have occurred. Jesus, the perfect human being, had to learn obedience.<sup>3</sup> Our desert crossing is a learning experience. The picture of the blooming desert is the vision that keeps us going.

Feeble hands, buckling knees and fearful hearts speak of the enemy within, but the mention of God’s vengeance and retribution point to an enemy around us. When Israel crossed the desert it faced not only a lack of water and food, there was also the attack by Amalek it had to deal with.<sup>4</sup> Isaiah confirms that God will continue to perform both miracles of victory.

Vv.5-7 turn the page to another picture in the same book. We are still looking at the transformation of the desert, as is obvious from the second half of these verses. The miracles of physical healing are part of the whole picture of transformation and renewal. Jesus’ ministry on earth gives a foretaste of what will

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7. Song 2:1
  1. Ps. 103:15,16
  2. Heb. 12:12,13
  3. See Heb. 5:7,8.
  4. Ex. 17:8-15

happen when this vision becomes a universal reality. Jesus healed those who were physically blind, deaf and lame. The revelation of God's glory will heal all illnesses and handicaps, both physical and spiritual.

A Dutch author wrote a book, entitled "Erik in the land of insects." It is the story of a boy who dreams that he gets into the picture of a meadow with insects that hangs above his bed. He meets the insects and discovers the similarity between them and some people he knows in the real world. God shows us this picture of His blooming desert and He wants us to go inside and experience it as a reality.

Vv.5-7 seem to suggest that there is a relationship between the healing of people and the healing of the desert. In a way, God's healing touch will allow us to see, hear and experience a spiritual reality that had been hidden to us. But it is also true that our healing will cause the healing of the land. The Psalmist sings: "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools."<sup>1</sup> God makes us both part and tool of His new creation.

There is a way to cross the desert, called "Holiness." It is a highway that leads through the places of hardship and opposition. It would be interesting if we could call back Moses or any of the Israelites that made the journey from Egypt to Canaan ages ago and put them in a modern vehicle to drive them over a paved road. The trip that took forty years can now be made in a couple of hours. How would the people of old react to such an experience?

Jesus compared our journey through life with walking on a small and difficult path. "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." In traveling the path Himself as a human being, filled with the Spirit of Holiness, Jesus transformed the path into a highway. Holiness makes traveling easy, but holiness is beyond our human grasp. It would be if God had not said: "I am the LORD, who makes you holy."<sup>2</sup>

Only those who are holy can travel the way of holiness. Holiness is both the road we travel on and a path in our heart. The literal translation of the Psalm verse, quoted above, "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage" is "O the happiness of a man whose strength is in You, Highways [are] in their heart."<sup>3</sup> That is why some people are excluded and the enemy has no access to it. Holiness is a pilgrimage. Without it we will not even have a desire to set out and begin the journey. While on the road, it will grow till we have reached our final destination and God will be all in all.

It may seem strange to us that holiness is required as a basis for starting out on the road. The principle of the Kingdom of Heaven is revealed in Jesus' *Parable of the Talents*. We read: "Everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."<sup>4</sup> Everyone who is ransomed, that is everyone who has accepted Jesus' death on the cross in payment for his sins, has received an installment of holiness to work with. That ought to be enough for us to set out on our pilgrimage. The goal is to enter Zion with singing and enjoy the crown of eternal joy. "Gladness and joy will overtake [us], and sorrow and sighing will flee away." The everlasting joy that will crown our heads may be too overwhelming for us to sing. The tears God will wipe away from our eyes will be tears of joy, not tears of sorrow.

b. Epilogue: the rock of history (36:1–37:38)

i. The first Assyrian embassy: the helpless king (36:1–37:7)

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1. Ps. 84:5,6

2. Lev. 20:8

3. Ps. 84:5 – Young's Literal Translation

4. Matt. 25:29

*1 In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them.*

*2 Then the king of Assyria sent his field commander with a large army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. When the commander stopped at the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field,*

*3 Eliakim son of Hilkiah the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph the recorder went out to him.*

*4 The field commander said to them, "Tell Hezekiah, "This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours?"*

*5 You say you have strategy and military strength — but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me?"*

*6 Look now, you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces a man's hand and wounds him if he leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him.*

*7 And if you say to me, "We are depending on the LORD our God" — isn't he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, "You must worship before this altar"?"*

*8 "Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses — if you can put riders on them!"*

*9 How then can you repulse one officer of the least of my master's officials, even though you are depending on Egypt for chariots and horsemen?"*

*10 Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this land without the LORD? The LORD himself told me to march against this country and destroy it."*

*11 Then Eliakim, Shebna and Joah said to the field commander, "Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, since we understand it. Don't speak to us in Hebrew in the hearing of the people on the wall."*

*12 But the commander replied, "Was it only to your master and you that my master sent me to say these things, and not to the men sitting on the wall — who, like you, will have to eat their own filth and drink their own urine?"*

*13 Then the commander stood and called out in Hebrew, "Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria!"*

*14 This is what the king says: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you!*

*15 Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD when he says, 'The LORD will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.'*

*16 "Do not listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then every one of you will eat from his own vine and fig tree and drink water from his own cistern, 17 until I come and take you to a land like your own — a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards.*

*18 "Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, 'The LORD will deliver us.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria?"*

*19 Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand?"*

*20 Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?"*

*21 But the people remained silent and said nothing in reply, because the king had commanded, "Do not answer him."*

*22 Then Eliakim son of Hilkiah the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph the recorder went to Hezekiah, with their clothes torn, and told him what the field commander had said. Chapter 37:1 When King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the LORD.*

*2 He sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and the leading priests, all wearing sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz.*

**3 They told him, "This is what Hezekiah says: This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver them.**

**4 It may be that the LORD your God will hear the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the LORD your God has heard. Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives."**

**5 When King Hezekiah's officials came to Isaiah,**

**6 Isaiah said to them, "Tell your master, 'This is what the LORD says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard — those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me.**

**7 Listen! I am going to put a spirit in him so that when he hears a certain report, he will return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword.'"**

In this section we move from poetry to politics. We return from a vision of heavenly bliss to, what is usually called, the hard reality of daily life. As it turns out, what we call vision is reality and what we consider to be real is but a vapor. The emperor of Assyria, King Sennacherib, thought he was a realist. He based his conviction upon numbers. He dealt with troops, horses and weapons. He did not believe in things spiritual, or at least he thought himself to be stronger than any resistance a god or idol could put up. He had such a high opinion of his own might that he failed to see the difference between real power and counterfeit.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section: "These chapters are a historical narrative matching 2 Kings 18 – 19. Isaiah cuts into the story at 2 Kings 18:13–16. The Assyrian king had apparently accepted Hezekiah's submission and a monetary satisfaction, but immediately renewed his pressure on Jerusalem. This is the 'treachery' referred to in 21:2; 24:16; 33:1. In Isaiah's narrative the scene is thus set for a straight clash between two kings: the 'great' king of the earth (36:4) and the beleaguered Davidic King in the city of promise (28:16). There is important background in Isaiah which makes this single incident of crucial significance. (a) In 14:24–27, Isaiah alerted his hearers to watch out for the crushing of 'the Assyrian in my land' (14:25). This is what the Lord has 'planned' and 'it will stand' (14:24), but it is also part of the Lord's purpose for 'the whole world' (14:26), that is to say, a case in point of his universal sovereign sway. The emphases 'it will stand (14:24) and 'who can thwart him?' (14:27) make this a point at which (if we may say so) the Lord cannot afford to fail. (b) The purpose of the cosmic panorama of chapters 13 – 27 was to display the dimensions of the kingdom of the coming King of David's line (9:6, 7; 11:1–16). Isaiah used the world map of his day and – as in 19:24–25 and 27:13 – made Egypt and Assyria symbols of the Lord's determination and power to make all nations his empire. (c) The series of six 'woes' in chapter 28 – 35 were historically concentrated on a situation in the last years of the eighth century BC, in which these very nations, the Davidic Kingdom, Egypt and Assyria, were embroiled with one another. Now is the time, if ever, for the Lord to demonstrate his mastery over history! In this way, the present chapters put the rock of history under the fabric of eschatology."

*Halley's Bible Handbook* observes about this story: "These passages seem to be a blended account of two invasions. Sennacherib, as leader of his father Sargon's armies, invaded Judah, 713 B C, and took many cities. Hezekiah bought him off, II Kin 18:14-16. He came again, 701 B C; at which time the Angel smote him." According to the record in II Kings, the king of Assyria took Samaria, after a three-year siege, in the sixth year of Hezekiah's reign.<sup>1</sup> Eight years later Sennacherib invaded Judah and took most of its cities. At that point Hezekiah tried to pay off the Assyrians. We read: "The king of Assyria exacted from Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. So Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the temple of the LORD and in the treasuries of the royal palace. At this time Hezekiah king of Judah stripped off the gold with which he had covered the doors and doorposts of the temple of the LORD, and gave it to the king of Assyria."<sup>2</sup> *The New Living Translation* renders this: "The king of Assyria then demanded a settlement of more than eleven tons of silver and about one ton of gold."

1. II Kings 18:9,10

2. II Kings 18:14-16

*The Living Bible* makes this more understandable with the paraphrase: “The king of Assyria then demanded a settlement of \$1,500,000.” What Isaiah describes here occurred in the same year of Hezekiah’s reign. Having pocketed the money, Sennacherib proceeded immediately to threaten Jerusalem. This king’s promises were not worth the parchment upon which they were written.

Bible scholars have argued about the accuracy of the time mentioned for these events. There is no reason to enter into that discussion in the framework of this study. The Assyrian army was at this point at Lachish, thirty miles southwest of Jerusalem. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “By this time Sennacherib had defeated the Tyrian and Philistine rebels, and the Egyptian army (on its one intervention) at El Tekeh, north of Lachish. Hezekiah was now isolated. Politically there was no reason why Sennacherib should return home without dealing with the last rebel state. To this extent his cynical acceptance of Hezekiah’s gold was typical of the amoral element in politics: it lessened Hezekiah’s capacity to buy allies and therefore further exposed him to Assyrian might.”

Humanly speaking, there was no hope for Jerusalem and the Assyrian army commander, who appeared at the wall of Jerusalem, could play with Judah as a cat with a mouse.

Isaiah mentions only one of the Assyrian king’s envoys, although the record in II Kings mentions three. The one Isaiah refers to was probably the spokesman, who knew Hebrew. The Hebrew text calls him *Rabshaqeh*, which is not a proper name but a title, probably the king’s cupbearer. *The King James Version* refers to the three-man delegation, using the Hebrew titles. We read: “And the king of Assyria sent Tartan and Rabsaris and Rab-shakeh from Lachish to king Hezekiah with a great host against Jerusalem.” *The New International Version* translates the titles: “The king of Assyria sent his supreme commander, his chief officer and his field commander with a large army, from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem.”<sup>1</sup>

The place where this committee issues its challenge “the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman’s Field,” is the same place where, twenty-three years earlier, Isaiah challenged King Ahaz to put his trust in the Lord instead of in Assyria.<sup>2</sup> How ironic are history’s twists!

The Assyrian committee of three is met by three members of Hezekiah’s council: “Eliakim son of Hilkiyah the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph the recorder.” It is obvious from the Assyrian commander’s speech, that he did his homework well in preparation for this confrontation. Sennacherib would, of course, be informed about Judah’s political moves and the pact with Egypt. But the speech shows a good understanding, in as far as that is possible for a person who does not believe in a supreme God, of Judah’s religious life and its intricacies. There seems to be an appeal to some people in Jerusalem who opposed Hezekiah’s reformations of the temple worship and the abolition of idolatry.

The basic assumption of Rabshakeh’s speech is atheistic. His approach is naturalistic. The only basis for resistance against the Assyrian superpower, in his mind, as representative of his king and his army, would be another army stronger than theirs. Egypt is ruled out and God is considered non-existent. The offer of two thousand horses is meant to add insult to injury. The twelve thousand horses that had been in Solomon’s stables in Jerusalem,<sup>3</sup> had long since disappeared, as had Solomon’s glory. The only thing Rabshakeh could see was a poor beleaguered city with a population struck by fear. This man could not see what Elisha and his servant saw during the siege of Samaria, that Jerusalem was surrounded by horses and chariots of fire all around.<sup>4</sup> When the Lord showed this glory to the Assyrians it was too late and a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp died.<sup>5</sup> It still remains true: “Those who are with us are

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1. II Kings 18:17
  2. See Isa. 7:3.
  3. See I Kings 10:26.
  4. See II Kings 6:17.
  5. Isa. 37:36

more than those who are with them.”<sup>1</sup> And: “The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”<sup>2</sup> If that is the lesson we learn from this story, we have learned a lot.

In saying: “Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this land without the LORD? The LORD himself told me to march against this country and destroy it,” the Assyrian general appealed to those in Jerusalem who had put their faith in God for their protection. He played a game with high stakes in doing so. It is true that he demonstrated a good deal of understanding of the working of a religious mind. But in appealing to the LORD as justification of Assyria’s imperial aspirations, and then denying the LORD’s ability to save Jerusalem, the Assyrian forfeited his own and his army’s chance of survival. He had no idea whom he was talking about.

The request of Hezekiah’s representatives to use Hebrew instead of Aramaic opens an interesting window. Neither Aramaic nor Hebrew appear to have been the authentic designations of the national language of either party. *Barnes’ Notes* explains: “Aram, or Aramea, properly meaning a high region, or the highlands, was of wider extent than Syria Proper, and comprehended not only Syria, but Mesopotamia. It usually denotes however, Syria Proper, of which the capital was Damascus. The language of all this country was probably the same—the Syrian or Aramean, a language of the same family as the Hebrew, and having a strong resemblance to that and to the Chaldee. This was not properly the language of Assyria, where probably a dialect composed of the language of the Medes and Persians was employed. But the Syriac language was spoken in different parts of Assyria. It was spoken in Mesopotamia, and doubtless in some of the provinces of the Assyrian empire, and might be presumed to be understood by Rabshakeh, and those with him. The Jews had contact with the Syrians, and those who had been sent out by Hezekiah had learned to speak that. It is not probable that they understood the Medo-Persian tongue that was spoken by the Assyrians usually. The Syriac or Aramean was probably the most common language which was spoken in that region. Its knowledge prevailed in the time of the Savior, and was that which he usually spoke ..., the language of Judah.”<sup>3</sup> It is remarkable that they did not call it the Hebrew language. But there might have been some national pride in regard to this. The Hebrew language had been the common language of all the Jews, and had been spoken by those of the kingdom of Israel or Samaria, as well as by those of the kingdom of Judah. But after the revolt of the ten tribes it is possible that they might have claimed the language as their own, and regarded the Hebrew—the venerable language of their fathers—as belonging to them especially, as they claimed everything that was sacred or venerable in the nation, and hence, they spoke of it as the language of Judah. The name of Judah, or Jews, which is derived from Judah, was, after the removal of the ten tribes, given to the entire nation—a name which is retained to the present time. In Isa 19:18, it is called the language of Canaan.”

The suggestion not to speak in Hebrew is swept aside by the Assyrian commander and makes him address the spectators on the wall directly. *The Living Bible* captures well the vulgarity of the threat with: “My master wants everyone in Jerusalem to hear this, not just you. He wants them to know that if you don’t surrender, this city will be put under siege until everyone is so hungry and thirsty that he will eat his own dung and drink his own urine.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on this second part of the Assyrian speech: “The Rab-shakeh ignores the politicians and goes straight to the people, reminding them (12) that rulers declare war but citizens suffer it. It is an understandable ploy to advise against trusting Hezekiah or the Lord (14–15); it is a plausible move to offer a new home instead of the horrors of a siege (16–17), but the Rab-shakeh made his cardinal error in equating the Lord with other gods and in scorning his power to save (18–20).”

Rabshakeh’s speech to the public suggests that he had some inside information about Isaiah’s prophecies. This brings us to an earlier suggestion in this study that Assyria may have had spies among the Judeans who provided Sennacherib with details about the condition of the city and the morale of the people.

1. II Kings 6:16
2. I John 4:4
3. The Hebrew text reads literally “Judean.”

The fact that the Rabshakeh was fluent in Hebrew may even suggest that he was a Jewish Quisling or that he had Jewish roots.

The gist of his speech was that surrender would avoid a siege with all the terrible suffering involved. The recent protracted siege of Samaria must have been still vivid in everybody's mind. Captivity to Assyria is offered as a peaceful settlement. There were two places where God did not want His people to return: Egypt and Mesopotamia. Moses had told the people: "The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, 'You are not to go back that way again.'"<sup>1</sup> And Abraham had said to his servant whom he sent out to Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac: "Make sure that you do not take my son back there ... The LORD, the God of heaven, who brought me out of my father's household and my native land and who spoke to me and promised me on oath, saying, 'To your offspring I will give this land' — he will send his angel before you so that you can get a wife for my son from there. If the woman is unwilling to come back with you, then you will be released from this oath of mine. Only do not take my son back there."<sup>2</sup> Since Solomon had sinned against the first command, trespassing the second did not seem too great an offence to the Assyrians; or maybe, they were not aware of the issue.

*The Book of Second Kings* gives a more complete version of Rabshakeh's words: "Make peace with me and come out to me. Then every one of you will eat from his own vine and fig tree and drink water from his own cistern, until I come and take you to a land like your own, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey. Choose life and not death!"<sup>3</sup> This proves that the man was very well versed, not only in the culture of the Jews, but even in their Biblical language.

As stated, the Rabshakeh's fatal mistake was to equate the Almighty with the local deities of other countries. *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes: "Nothing can be more absurd in itself, nor a greater affront to the true and living God, than to compare him with the gods of the heathen; as if he could do no more for the protection of his worshippers than they can for the protection of theirs, and as if the God of Israel could as easily be mastered as the gods of Hamath and Arphad, whereas they are vanity and a lie. They are nothing; he is the great I AM; they are the creatures of men's fancy and the works of men's hands; he is the Creator of all things."

We do not know how much knowledge of the Creator of heaven and earth was still alive in the culture of the Assyrians. As far as we can ascertain, atheism in the form in which it exists now, had not been born yet. Even in their idolatry, most nations had a notion of the existence of a God of heaven. The problem of the Assyrians was that they had come to the place of God's revelation of Himself and they could not recognize Him. In this they were not alone. "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him."<sup>4</sup> The fact that God is present in this world in disguise still throws many people off. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.'"<sup>5</sup>

At Hezekiah's order, no one gave an answer to the Assyrians. God would give them His own answer. The committee that had met with the Assyrians went back to the palace with their clothes torn. They must have done this because they felt that they were defeated. They needed a miracle to survive the Assyrian threat. Most of us feel that we are in desperate straits if we need a miracle to survive.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, heads chapter 39 with: "The king's reaction: faith at last!" We read: "The king reacts at once with penitence and turning to the Lord (1). A deputation is sent to Isaiah (2) eating

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1. Deut. 17:16
  2. Gen. 24:6-8
  3. II Kings 18:31,32
  4. John 1:10
  5. I Cor. 1:18,19

humble pie (3), noting the element of blasphemy and asking prayer (4). Isaiah, however does not pray nor make any new approach to the Lord: the word of the Lord, once given, stands (5–6): the Lord will remove both threat and threatener (7).” The reason for the king’s and the committee’s attire may have been fear that the Assyrians would make good on their threat. But God accepts it as an indication of humility. What is humility other than recognition of being powerless? If we confess that we cannot do it and that unless the Lord does it, it will not be done, God accepts this and He will act. David said: “My eyes are ever on the LORD, for only he will release my feet from the snare.”<sup>1</sup> The fly that struggles to free itself from the spider’s web entangles itself and will be defeated. Unless the Lord releases us, we will remain in the snare. “Lord, help!” is the cry of the humble.

Hezekiah’s illustration of the birth of a baby is revealing. Normally, the mother delivers her baby by helping the child through the birth canal by pushing during the contractions. When the mother gives up, the baby is doomed. For a man to compare himself with a woman in labor is, in itself, an act of humility. To compare himself to a woman who is unable to give birth is a deathblow to all male pride. Hezekiah proved himself to be a truly humble man.

- ii. The second Assyrian embassy: the godly king (37:8–35)

**8** *When the field commander heard that the king of Assyria had left Lachish, he withdrew and found the king fighting against Libnah.*

**9** *Now Sennacherib received a report that Tirhakah, the Cushite king [of Egypt], was marching out to fight against him. When he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah with this word:*

**10** *"Say to Hezekiah king of Judah: Do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says, 'Jerusalem will not be handed over to the king of Assyria.'*

**11** *Surely you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the countries, destroying them completely. And will you be delivered?*

**12** *Did the gods of the nations that were destroyed by my forefathers deliver them--the gods of Gozan, Haran, Rezeph and the people of Eden who were in Tel Assar?*

**13** *Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, or of Hena or Ivvah?"*

**14** *Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the LORD and spread it out before the LORD.*

**15** *And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD:*

**16** *"O LORD Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth.*

**17** *Give ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God.*

**18** *"It is true, O LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands.*

**19** *They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands.*

**20** *Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God."*

**21** *Then Isaiah son of Amoz sent a message to Hezekiah: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria,*

**22** *this is the word the LORD has spoken against him: "The Virgin Daughter of Zion despises and mocks you. The Daughter of Jerusalem tosses her head as you flee.*

**23** *Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes in pride? Against the Holy one of Israel!*

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1. Ps. 25:15

**24** *By your messengers you have heaped insults on the Lord. And you have said, With my many chariots I have ascended the heights of the mountains, the utmost heights of Lebanon. I have cut down its tallest cedars, the choicest of its pines. I have reached its remotest heights, the finest of its forests.*

**25** *I have dug wells in foreign lands and drunk the water there. With the soles of my feet I have dried up all the streams of Egypt.'*

**26** *"Have you not heard? Long ago I ordained it. In days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass, that you have turned fortified cities into piles of stone.*

**27** *Their people, drained of power, are dismayed and put to shame. They are like plants in the field, like tender green shoots, like grass sprouting on the roof, scorched before it grows up.*

**28** *"But I know where you stay and when you come and go and how you rage against me.*

**29** *Because you rage against me and because your insolence has reached my ears, I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will make you return by the way you came.*

**30** *"This will be the sign for you, O Hezekiah: "This year you will eat what grows by itself, and the second year what springs from that. But in the third year sow and reap, plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*

**31** *Once more a remnant of the house of Judah will take root below and bear fruit above.*

**32** *For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.*

**33** *"Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria: "He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it.*

**34** *By the way that he came he will return; he will not enter this city," declares the LORD.*

**35** *"I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!"*

There is in the verses that describe the going of Hezekiah's servants to Isaiah and Isaiah's answer to them an interesting touch in Hebrew that is lost in the English translations. *The New International Version* calls the delegation "King Hezekiah's officials." *The King James Version* calls them "the servants of king Hezekiah." The Hebrew word here is *'ebed*, meaning "a servant." We find the word in connection with Abraham's servant in the verse "[Abraham] said to the chief *servant* in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, 'Put your hand under my thigh.'" <sup>1</sup> In his answer to the king, Isaiah calls the Rabshakeh and his men "the underlings of the king of Assyria." *The King James Version* calls them "the servants of the king of Assyria." The Hebrew word here is *na'ar*, which means "a boy." God uses it of Isaac when Abraham was about to sacrifice him. We read: "'Do not lay a hand on *the boy*,' he said. 'Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.'" <sup>2</sup> It seems doubtful that the Rabshakeh would have considered himself to be one of king Sennacherib's "boys."

Isaiah's answer was cryptic but comforting. The following events confirmed the truth of his message because the Assyrians withdrew immediately. We do not get the whole picture of the circumstances that caused Sennacherib to change his mind temporarily and withdraw. The rumor of an Egyptian attack seems to have caused a change in plan. But as far as the Assyrian king was concerned, this was only a momentary change in strategy. King Sennacherib put this in writing and sent a delegation to Jerusalem to hand the threatening letter to King Hezekiah. In this letter Sennacherib seems to take God more seriously than he had ever done before. At least he believed that the God of Israel was real enough that He could deceive people. It sounds as if Isaiah's message to Hezekiah had somehow come to the Assyrian king's ears. This would be further proof of the presence of spies in Jerusalem.

Actually, the letter only deals with the subject of God and the fulfillment of His promise of deliverance. There is no longer any mention of Egypt, cavalry or any other military options. Sennacherib's letter is a direct attack upon God. Besides threatening God, the Assyrian king also issues a threat against Hezekiah's life. "Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, or of

1. Gen. 24:2

2. Gen. 22:12

Hena or Ivvah?” suggests that these kings had been executed by the Assyrians after their countries had been occupied.

King Hezekiah took the letter to the temple, spread it out before the curtain that hung at the entrance beyond which he was not allowed to enter and he said to the Lord: “You read this! This is an insult to your holy Name!” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes about Hezekiah’s prayer: “Verses 15-20 contain Hezekiah’s prayer and, as with all Bible prayers (e.g. Ne.9; Dn. 9; Acts 4:24–31), this prayer is preoccupied with God: who he is (16), his honor (17), his uniqueness (18–19) and the revelation of his glory in the world (20).” Hezekiah’s vision of God as the God of all the earth also reveals his understanding of the role God intended Israel to play in world history. Most of Israel’s kings as well as the nation as a whole had come to consider themselves as the only people who could lay a claim on God. They had lost their concept of being a kingdom of priests to stand between the Almighty and the rest of the world. Hezekiah understood the truth of what the Apostle Paul would later express as: “Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.”<sup>1</sup> He cannot have known how God would save the world through Israel but he knew that God had promised Abraham that the whole world would be blessed through him and his offspring. If we understand who we are in God’s plan of salvation, we have the assurance of our own salvation and we know that God will save us in all of our circumstances.

This time we do not read that Hezekiah sent a delegation to Isaiah, but God answered the king directly through His prophet. God let Hezekiah know that He read the letter and this is the answer: “The Virgin Daughter of Zion despises and mocks you. The Daughter of Jerusalem tosses her head as you flee.” God tells King Hezekiah to poke fun at the strongest army in the world and at King Sennacherib, the strongest man of his time. Sennacherib’s insults are met by derision because he made a fool of himself by insulting the Almighty. How dumb to put an insult to God in writing!

Israel is called here “The Virgin Daughter of Zion.” There seems to be a reference to “the bride of Christ” in this designation. God had set apart the people of Israel and the church for His Son, the Messiah. No other power would be allowed to touch her. The people of Jerusalem in Isaiah’s day may not have demonstrated the bridal purity that God desired in them, but Hezekiah’s prayer of faith had restored them to their rightful position of being “the daughter of Zion,” the maidens that belonged to Zion, the place God had chosen to reveal Himself in this world. When Assyria came to rape Judah and Jerusalem, her reaction was not one of fear, as was to be expected, but of scorn and mockery.

Sennacherib had tried to touch God by threatening God’s bride. The Bible calls Israel “the apple of [God’s] eye.”<sup>2</sup> God mocks him for trying to do so. Sennacherib’s boast was that he had felled the cedars of Lebanon, drunk the water of the countries he invaded and dried up the Nile that fed Egypt. The Assyrian king probably fed his ego with this kind of poetry. He had lost sight of the One who had planted Lebanon’s cedars and created the River Nile. In doing to Lebanon and Egypt what he did, this man believed he had become more powerful than the Creator of the universe. God quotes Sennacherib’s words back at him. His messenger boys had said to King Hezekiah: “Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this land without the LORD? The LORD himself told me to march against this country and destroy it.”<sup>3</sup> God had called Assyrian “the rod of my anger.”<sup>4</sup> Long ago, even before Israel had entered Canaan, God had said to Israel through Moses: “However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: ... The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping

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1. Rom. 9:4,5
  2. See Deut. 32:10; Zech. 2:8.
  3. Isa. 36:10
  4. Isa. 10:5

down, a nation whose language you will not understand, a fierce-looking nation without respect for the old or pity for the young. They will devour the young of your livestock and the crops of your land until you are destroyed. They will leave you no grain, new wine or oil, nor any calves of your herds or lambs of your flocks until you are ruined. They will lay siege to all the cities throughout your land until the high fortified walls in which you trust fall down. They will besiege all the cities throughout the land the LORD your God is giving you.”<sup>1</sup> Sennacherib’s invasion was not his own idea, it had been God’s. But the Assyrian king believed that he had worked himself up to this position of being “the rod of God’s anger” by his own power. The power God had allowed him to exercise had completely corrupted him. Power tends to do that.

The Assyrians treated their captives as animals by putting hooks in their noses and pulling them along. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* states: “In a bas-relief of Khorsabad, captives are led before the king by a cord attached to a hook, or ring, passing through the under lip, or the upper lip and nose.” Now God says to this proud man: “I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will make you return by the way you came.”

For the second time in Isaiah’s book God promises the King of Judah a sign as confirmation of His promise. King Ahaz had refused to ask for a sign, but God gave him one anyhow.<sup>2</sup> To Hezekiah God says that the land will testify to the truth of His Word. The sign given is the sign of the Sabbath Year. We read in Leviticus: “The LORD said to Moses on Mount Sinai, ‘Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the LORD. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest. Whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food for you — for yourself, your manservant and maidservant, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you, as well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land. Whatever the land produces may be eaten.’”<sup>3</sup> It seems that this law had never been obeyed consistently. Speaking about the Babylonian captivity, the author of *Second Chronicles* states: “The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.”<sup>4</sup>

The threat of a siege of Jerusalem must have prevented the people from leaving the city and tending their fields. The sign God promised to Hezekiah was the sign of the Sabbath Year. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “The invasion prevented sowing in 702 BC, but when the threat lifted in 701 they would find sufficient growth to preserve life; in 701 the withdrawing Assyrians still inhibited agriculture, yet in 700 there would still be enough through ‘chance growth.’ Thus the Lord would confirm retrospectively that it was his hand that dispersed the threat.” But the sign had a deeper meaning than a reminder of the law on the Sabbath Year for the land. As the sign given to King Ahaz foretold the birth of Christ, so foretells Hezekiah’s sign the birth of the church of Christ. This promise was meant to be a consolation for those who would be taken into captivity a century later. Those who would see Jerusalem being burned down and the temple destroyed would have an anchor of hope for their souls.

iii. The finale: Assyrian overthrow (37:36–38)

**36 Then the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning — there were all the dead bodies!**

**37 So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there.**

1. Deut. 28:15, 49-52
2. See Isa. 7:10-17.
3. Lev. 25:1-7
4. II Chron. 36:21

***38 One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer cut him down with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king.***

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, reflects here: “Isaiah foretold the breaking of Assyrian power in Judah (14:24–27) and this is how it happened. Light on the event from outside the Bible is sparse, for it was not the Assyrian way to record disasters. All we know is that a divine act of massive proportions, performed with consummate ease, settled the issue and provided a crowning proof of Isaiah’s contention that the Lord is master of history and that the way of faith is effective in the affairs of this life.” After this total defeat Sennacherib reigned for another 21 years, but he never tried to invade Palestine again.

There has been a lot of discussion and speculation among Bible scholars, as far back as the time of Josephus, about what actually caused this massive killing of Sennacherib’s army.

*Barnes’ Notes* comments extensively on the event, stating about the speculations: “The chief suppositions which have been made of the means of that destruction are the following:

1. It has been supposed that it was by the direct agency of an angel, without any second causes. But this supposition has not been generally adopted. It is contrary to the usual modes in which God directs the affairs of the world. His purposes are usually accomplished by some second causes, and in accordance with the usual course of events. Calvin supposes that it was accomplished by the direct agency of one or more angels sent forth for the purpose.

2. Some have supposed that it was accomplished by Tirhakah, king of Ethiopia, who is supposed to have pursued Sennacherib, and to have overthrown his army in a single night near Jerusalem. But it is sufficient to say in reply to this, that there is not the slightest historical evidence to support it; and had this been the mode, it would have been so recorded, and time fact would have been stated.

3. It has been attributed by some ... to the hot pestilential wind which often prevails in the East, and which is often represented as suddenly destroying travelers, and indeed whole caravans. This wind, called sam, simum, samiel, or simoom, has been usually supposed to be poisonous, and almost instantly destructive to life .... It is not, however, referred to in the Scripture account of the destruction of Sennacherib; and whatever may be true of it in the deserts of Arabia or Nubia, there is no evidence whatever that such poisonous effects are ever experienced in Palestine.

4. It has been attributed to a storm of hail, accompanied with thunder and lightning. This is the opinion of Vitranga, and seems to accord with the descriptions which are given in the prophecy of the destruction of the army in Isa 29:6; 30:30. To this opinion, as the most probable, I have been disposed to incline, for although these passages may be regarded as figurative, yet the more natural interpretation is to regard them as descriptive of the event. We know that such a tempest might be easily produced by God, and that violent tornadoes are not infrequent in the East. One of the plagues of Egypt consisted in such a tremendous storm of hail accompanied with thunder, when ‘the fire ran along the ground,’ so that ‘there was hail, and fire mingled with the hail,’ and so that ‘the hail smote throughout all the land of Egypt all that was in the field, both man and beast’ (Ex 9:22-25). This description, in its terror, its suddenness, and its ruinous effects, accords more nearly with the account of the destruction of Sennacherib than any other which has been made. See the notes at Isa 30:30, for a remarkable description of the officer of a storm of hail.

5. It has been supposed by many that it was accomplished by the pestilence. This is the account which Josephus gives (Ant. x. 1. 5), and is the supposition which has been adopted by ... many others. But there are two objections to this supposition. One is, that it does not well accord with the description of the prophet (Isa 29:6; 30:30); and the other, and more material one is, that the plague does not accomplish its work so suddenly. This was done in a single night; whereas, though the plague appears suddenly, and has been known to destroy whole armies, yet there is no recorded instance in which it has been so destructive in a few hours as in this case. It may be added, also, that the plague does not often leave an army in the manner described here. One hundred and eighty five thousand were suddenly slain. The survivors, if there were any,

as we have reason to suppose (Isa 37:37), fled, and returned to Nineveh. There is no mention made of any who lingered, and who remained sick among the slain.

Nor is there any apprehension mentioned, as having existed among the Jews of going into the camp, and stripping the dead, and bearing the spoils of the army into the city. Had the army been destroyed by the plague, such is the fear of the contagion in countries where it prevails, that nothing would have induced them to endanger the city by the possibility of introducing the dreaded disease. The account leads us to suppose that the inhabitants of Jerusalem immediately sallied forth and stripped the dead, and bore the spoils of the army into the city .... On the whole, therefore, the most probable supposition seems to be, that, if any secondary causes were employed, it was the agency of a violent tempest—a tempest of mingled hail and fire, which suddenly descended upon the mighty army. Whatever was the agent, however, it was the hand of God that directed it. It was a most fearful exhibition of his power and justice; and it furnishes a most awful threatening to proud and haughty blasphemers and revilers, and a strong ground of assurance to the righteous that God will defend them in times of peril.

It may be added, that Herodotus has given an account which was undoubtedly derived from some rumor of the entire destruction of the Assyrian army. He says (ii. 141) that when Sennacherib was in Egypt and engaged in the siege of Pelusium, an Egyptian priest prayed to God, and God heard his prayer, and sent a judgment upon him. 'For,' says he, 'a multitude of mice gnawed to pieces in one night both the bows and the rest of the armor of the Assyrians, and that it was on that account that the king, when he had no bows left, drew off his army from Pelusium.' This is probably a corruption of the history which we have here. At all events, the account in Herodotus does not conflict with the main statement of Isaiah, but is rather a confirmation of that statement, that the army of Sennacherib met with sudden discomfiture."

The general conclusion we can draw from the above is that no sufficient details of the disaster are known at present to allow us to draw any conclusion.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on the last verse of this chapter: "He was assassinated in 681 – and maybe Isaiah lived to see this final stroke and to note the distinction between 'a living God' who hears prayer and in whose house king Hezekiah began to find his true security, and a god of wood and stone in whose house king Sennacherib met his death."

## **THE BOOK OF THE SERVANT (38-55)**

### **V. HEZEKIAH AND THE WAY OF FAITH: THE DECISIVE SIN (38:1 – 8)**

#### **a. One prayer, two answers (38:1–8)**

*1 In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover."*

*2 Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD,*

*3 "Remember, O LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.*

*4 Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah:*

*5 "Go and tell Hezekiah, 'This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life.*

*6 And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.*

*7 "This is the LORD's sign to you that the LORD will do what he has promised:*

*8 I will make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz.'" So the sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down.*

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, provides an extensive introduction and comment to the report of Hezekiah's sickness, which in this case we will not copy word for word. He discusses the matter of our decisions, the consequences of which we cannot oversee. That point is quite pertinent in connection with the

story of Hezekiah's illness and divine healing. We know from the end of this chapter that the king suffered from a boil. We read: "Isaiah had said, 'Prepare a poultice of figs and apply it to the boil, and he will recover.'"<sup>1</sup> Boils are rarely life threatening, unless they occur at a place where they interfere with the functioning of vital organs. It could be the fever caused by it that imperiled the king's life.

Boils must not have been uncommon among the Israelites and the application of a poultice of figs to an ulcer may have been a common remedy. We may assume that the king had refused medication for the purpose of praying. The record, however, only states that the king prayed after he received Isaiah's message that his condition was terminal. We cannot use this story as an illustration in the argument about whether Christians ought to seek the Lord and abstain from the use of all medication. After all, God's answer to Hezekiah's prayer seems to be: "Take your medicine!"

Some Bible scholars believe that "the boil" was actually a manifestation of the plague. A diagnosis of the king's sickness is, of course, impossible from our point of view. It seems, however, that if Hezekiah had the plague, the whole city would have been in grave danger of infection and there would have been some mention of this. Another point of contention is the chronology of this story. On the basis of God's promise in v.6: "And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city," it has been assumed that the Assyrians had not yet appeared at Jerusalem, as was recorded in the previous chapters.

According to the record in Second Kings, Hezekiah was "twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years."<sup>2</sup> If the twenty-nine years include the fifteen years that were given him after this sickness, it means that the king was thirty-nine when he fell ill and Isaiah announced that he was going to die. Apart from the fact that, humanly speaking, Hezekiah was too young to die, one additional hardship seems to have been that, at this point, he had no heir to the throne. When Hezekiah died fifteen years later, his son Manasseh was only twelve years old.<sup>3</sup> It seemed that Hezekiah's death at the time Isaiah announced it to him would have meant that the Lord would break His promise to have one of David's sons perpetually upon the throne of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes it seems that God's way of dealing with us is inconsistent with His promises. God had promised Abraham that He would make him into a great nation through Isaac, but when Isaac married Rebekah, she found herself unable to get pregnant. We read: "Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant."<sup>5</sup> We are not told whether Hezekiah wrestled with thoughts of God's inconsistency regarding His promises. In his prayer for healing, the king does not mention the matter of succession to the throne of Israel. Actually, the reasons Hezekiah presents in his prayer for healing are not the basis upon which God hears prayer. Salvation is by grace, not by works and King Hezekiah believed God should save him because of his works. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on this, saying: "When the Lord replied (5), he only alluded to the fact of prayer and the evidence of tears; he did not comment on Hezekiah's mistaken reliance on his claim to steadfastness in action (*walking ... faithfully*) and inner integrity (*wholehearted devotion*). It is a measure of the Lord's mercy that he hears prayer even when it rests on a false assumption like the bargaining power of good works."

The record in Second Kings states that God answered Hezekiah's prayer instantly. Isaiah had not yet left the palace grounds when the answer came. We read: "Before Isaiah had left the middle court, the word of the LORD came to him: 'Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people,' 'This is what the

1. Isa. 38:21
2. II Kings 18:2
3. See II Kings 21:1.
4. II Sam. 7:16
5. Gen. 25:21

LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you. On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the LORD. I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for my sake and for the sake of my servant David.' ' '1 Although the answer came instantaneously, healing would take a few days.

Second Kings also provides more details about the sign that accompanied Hezekiah's healing. Evidently, the king had his doubts and asked for a sign. He must not have taken the Word of the Lord through Isaiah at face value. He had prayed, but when the answer came he had a hard time believing it. We also learn that the giving of the sign was Isaiah's idea. He had to pray for God to perform this miracle.<sup>2</sup> This miracle Isaiah asked for was equal to the standing still of the sun in answer to Joshua's prayer. Actually, it was one of even greater proportions because for the shadow to go back ten steps, the earth's rotation would not just have to be stopped, but reversed. Isaiah's faith was not for a small sign but for an event that would involve the whole cosmos. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: "The textual uncertainties in verse 8 do not imperil the reality of the sign. The *stairway of Ahaz* may have let to his 'upper room' (2 Ki. 23:12). By accident or design its steps were a sun-clock. The sign confirming the double promise was that the shadow would recede. It would be as improper to suggest how this was done as to deny what is recorded. The Creator is master of his creation and even time is his created servant (Jos. 9:12-14)."

Much has been written about the phenomenon mentioned here that falls outside the scope of this study. As *Barnes' Notes* observes: "Few subjects have perplexed commentators more than this account of the sun-dial of Ahaz." The point of importance for us is that God is ready to literally move mountains, even heaven and earth, in answer to a prayer of faith.

b. Death and life (38:9-22)

**9 A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah after his illness and recovery:**

**10 I said, "In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years?"**

**11 I said, "I will not again see the LORD, the LORD, in the land of the living; no longer will I look on mankind, or be with those who now dwell in this world.**

**12 Like a shepherd's tent my house has been pulled down and taken from me. Like a weaver I have rolled up my life, and he has cut me off from the loom; day and night you made an end of me.**

**13 I waited patiently till dawn, but like a lion he broke all my bones; day and night you made an end of me.**

**14 I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove. My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens. I am troubled; O Lord, come to my aid!"**

**15 But what can I say? He has spoken to me, and he himself has done this. I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul.**

**16 Lord, by such things men live; and my spirit finds life in them too. You restored me to health and let me live.**

**17 Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back.**

**18 For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.**

**19 The living, the living — they praise you, as I am doing today; fathers tell their children about your faithfulness.**

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1. II Kings 20:4-6

2. See II Kings 20:8-11.

**20 The LORD will save me, and we will sing with stringed instruments all the days of our lives in the temple of the LORD.**

**21 Isaiah had said, "Prepare a poultice of figs and apply it to the boil, and he will recover."**

**22 Hezekiah had asked, "What will be the sign that I will go up to the temple of the LORD?"**

This Psalm of Hezekiah gives evidence of the same poetic gift of the king's great ancestor David, who was called "Israel's singer of songs."<sup>1</sup> The first five verses of this Psalm deal with Hezekiah's experience of suffering; vv.15-20 express his gratitude for God's healing. V.10 reads in *The New International Version*: "In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death." The Hebrew text reads literally: "In the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of Sheol." The Hebrew word *demiya* literally means "quiet." We find it in the verses: "I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never *be silent* day or night. You who call on the LORD, *give yourselves no rest*, and give him no *rest* till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth."<sup>2</sup> Some Bible scholars render it "in the zenith of my life." That is an interesting and plausible translation in connection with the sign of the sundial.

The prevailing concept of Hezekiah's day of life after death, or the lack of it, seems to form the background of Hezekiah's agony. The hope of glory in afterlife never completely disappears in the Old Testament. Asaph's Psalm gives us to understand that the faithful Jew did not believe that life ended at the time of death. We read: "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."<sup>3</sup> But Hezekiah was right in seeing death as an enemy, an intruder in God's original plan with mankind. Even with our hope in the resurrection, we recoil at death as unnatural and divisive, separating loved ones and causing grief. Hezekiah's hope had been, like David's, to "see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living."<sup>4</sup> Death never becomes natural, not even in old age.

The two images of the transience of life in v.12 are beautiful and expressive. A shepherd's tent is one of the most temporary structures imaginable. It has nothing that is permanent and is meant for one or two nights only. The Apostle Paul compares life and earth with life in heaven saying: "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."<sup>5</sup> Paul's "groaning" differs from Hezekiah's in that, Hezekiah wanted to remain in his tent and Paul wanted to get out of it.

The second picture of the weaver and the loom is even more expressive. It says that Hezekiah felt that his cloth was cut off before it was finished. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, remarks insightfully: "The individual weaves the pattern of his life; the Lord determines the time allowed for the weaving." The Hebrew text reads literally: "From day to night you will make an end of me." Hezekiah felt like a little insect, an ephemeron, a one-day creature, born in the morning to die at night. Isaiah's millennial prophecy toward the end of this book may have been based upon Hezekiah's Psalm here: "Never again will there be in

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1. II Sam. 23:1
  2. Isa. 62:6,7
  3. Ps. 73:23-26
  4. Ps. 27:13
  5. II Cor. 5:1-5

it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.”<sup>1</sup>

Vv.13 and 14 sound like a description of what Hezekiah thought would be the last night of his life. God was to him like a lion ready to crush its prey and Hezekiah saw himself as a little bird caught in the monster’s jaws. Yet, the beauty of the verse is that the prey calls out to the lion and the lion hears its prayer! The God who crushes is the Lord who saves. C. S. Lewis says: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” God caught Hezekiah’s attention in this ultimate experience. God spoke to him both in his sickness and in his recovery.

The accompanying sign in which the sundial testified to the truth of God’s Word was so overwhelmingly great that Hezekiah did not know what to answer. In this Psalm he promises: “I will walk humbly all my years.” If only the king had kept this promise! Scripture reports elsewhere about Hezekiah’s experience: “In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. He prayed to the LORD, who answered him and gave him a miraculous sign. But Hezekiah’s heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore the LORD’s wrath was on him and on Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah repented of the pride of his heart, as did the people of Jerusalem; therefore the LORD’s wrath did not come upon them during the days of Hezekiah.”<sup>2</sup>

“Lord, by such things men live; and my spirit finds life in them too” as *The New International Version* renders it, is one of the possible and plausible readings of the Hebrew text. The Hebrew reads more cryptically: “O Lord, by these [things men] live, and in all these [things is] the life of my spirit.” Hezekiah’s thoughts, however, are clear enough. This most painful experience has given him insight in the deeper meaning of life. The king came to the same conclusion of Moses at the end of Israel’s desert crossing: “He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”<sup>3</sup> For the Israelites the pain of hunger led them to discover the real source of satisfaction; for Hezekiah facing death made him see the true meaning of life.

It remains true though that, although Hezekiah initially drew the right conclusions from his experience, the overall verdict about the remainder of his life was that he failed to live up to the miracle of his salvation. The fact that God made the shade on the sundial move back ten degrees went to his head. He began to take credit for the attention God had paid to him and he considered himself to be the most important man in the universe, the man who could make the sun move backward. Although we read that Joshua saw a similar answer to his prayer, we never read that this turned him into a proud person. And Joshua prayed a prayer of faith. The miracle given to Hezekiah was in response to his unbelief. The greater the miracles God performs in our lives, the greater the danger to which we are exposed. The Apostle Paul demonstrates the right response by saying: “Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”<sup>4</sup> The greater the miracle the more humility we need to cope with it.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on the last verses of Hezekiah’s Psalm: “In verses 18–20, in a beautifully rounded way, Hezekiah brings his ‘writing’ to a conclusion. Verses 18–19, with their theme of returning to life from the brink of death, match 11 with its theme of sinking from the land of the living into the ‘land of cessation’; verse 20 finds Hezekiah in the ‘house of the Lord,’ matching 10 where he was about

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1. Isa. 65:20
  2. II Chron. 32:24-26
  3. Deut. 8:3
  4. II Cor. 12:6,7

to go through ‘the gates of death.’ These contrasts bring into focus the whole movement of the psalm from death to life.”

V.18 seems to state that Hezekiah had no hope of life after death, although he does not say specifically that the dead do not praise God. “For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness” puts the burden on Sheol and death itself, not on its victims. David wrote: “No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?”<sup>1</sup> And: “What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?”<sup>2</sup> And: “Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in Destruction?”<sup>3</sup> And: “It is not the dead who praise the LORD, those who go down to silence; it is we who extol the LORD, both now and forevermore. Praise the LORD.”<sup>4</sup>

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “Plainly Hezekiah believed in a world of disembodied spirits; his language does not imply what skepticism has drawn from it, but simply that he regarded the disembodied state as one incapable of declaring the praises of God before men; because it is, as regards this world, an unseen land of stillness: ‘the living’ alone can praise God on earth, in reference to which only he is speaking; Isa 57:1-2, shows that at this time the true view of the blessedness of the righteous dead was held, though not with the full clearness of the Gospel, which ‘has brought life and immortality to light’ (2 Tim. 1:10).” The reference in Isaiah 57 reads: “The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.” *Barnes’ Notes* also takes the stand that Hezekiah had some concept of life after death. We read: “The word ‘praise’ here refers evidently to the public and solemn celebration of the goodness of God. It is clear, I think, that Hezekiah had a belief in a future state, or that he expected to dwell with ‘the inhabitants of the land of silence’ (Isa. 38:11) when he died. But he did not regard that state as one adapted to the celebration of the public praises of God. It was a land of darkness; an abode of silence and stillness; a place where there was no temple, and no public praise such as he had been accustomed to.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* seems to lean to a more modified view of the text with: “It is avoiding the plain force of these passages to say that Hezekiah *only means* that those who go to Hades in a state of condemnation cannot be expected there to praise God ... He speaks broadly and generally of all: ‘The living, the living, shall praise thee; *Sheol* cannot praise thee; Death cannot celebrate thee.’ Manifestly, though he believes in a future state, it is one in which there is either no energy at all, or at any rate no devotional energy. He may think, with Isaiah, that ‘the righteous man,’ when he is ‘taken away,’ will ‘enter into peace’ (... Isaiah 57:1, 2); but absolute ‘peace’ precludes energy ... Hezekiah shrinks from losing all his activities, including his sense of personal communion with God. He does not, perhaps, ‘look on the condition of the faithful departed as one of *comfortless gloom*’; but he views it as one of deprivation, and is unwilling to enter into it. It was by the coming of Christ and the preaching of his gospel that ‘life and immortality’ were first truly ‘brought to light’ (... 2 Timothy 1:10).”

Although it is impossible for us to conclude with absolute certainty what the prevailing philosophy of life and death was for most of the Old Testament saints, it is clear that it was for most of them “The undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveller returns.”<sup>5</sup> It is only by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ that we have become partakers of “the hope of glory.”

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1. Ps. 6:5
  2. Ps. 30:9
  3. Ps. 88:11
  4. Ps. 115:17,18
  5. From Hamlet’s soliloquy – Shakespeare

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, makes the concluding comment on the topic: “When Hezekiah says that *the grave ... cannot praise you*, he is not, of course, making a comment on death as such but on the sort of death he would himself have experienced, death under divine wrath with sin unforgiven. In such a death there is no hope, no continuing, joyful relationship with God (18ab), no future to look forward to, bringing experience of divine *faithfulness* (18cd). The initial *For* makes this the explanation of the Lord’s saving mercies to Hezekiah. The Lord finds no pleasure in such a death; rather it is ‘to the praise of his glorious grace’ (Eph. 1:6) that he has devised and bestowed his saving mercies, the love which *kept me from the pit* (17). *Praise* (19), therefore, is the mark of the saved. They are the truly living.”

Although there are elements of truth in all these opinions, none point to the fact that death is as much God’s enemy as it is ours. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”<sup>1</sup> The only praise in death is the fact that “our Savior, Christ Jesus has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”<sup>2</sup>

“The LORD will save me” is the rendering of a more cryptic Hebrew idiom “The LORD to save me.” *The New King James Version* renders this: “The LORD *was ready* to save me.” *The New Living Translation*, more vividly, reads: “Think of it — the LORD has healed me!” The idiom probably expresses surprise.

Part of the promise of healing had been: “On the third day from now you will go up to the temple of the LORD.”<sup>3</sup> With that in mind, Hezekiah concludes his Psalm with the words: “We will sing with stringed instruments all the days of our lives in the temple of the LORD.” The words remind us of David’s statement: “I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.” “All the days of our lives” seems to limit the king’s praise to life on earth. David spoke of eternity. Maybe the two are one and Hezekiah redeems himself here with an expression of hope of life eternal.

c. The moment of decision (39:1–8)

***1 At that time Merodach-Baladan son of Baladan king of Babylon sent Hezekiah letters and a gift, because he had heard of his illness and recovery.***

***2 Hezekiah received the envoys gladly and showed them what was in his storehouses — the silver, the gold, the spices, the fine oil, his entire armory and everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in his palace or in all his kingdom that Hezekiah did not show them.***

***3 Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah and asked, "What did those men say, and where did they come from?" "From a distant land," Hezekiah replied. "They came to me from Babylon."***

***4 The prophet asked, "What did they see in your palace?" "They saw everything in my palace," Hezekiah said. "There is nothing among my treasures that I did not show them."***

***5 Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD Almighty:***

***6 The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD.***

***7 And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon."***

***8 "The word of the LORD you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime."***

Hezekiah’s healing did not pass unnoticed in the rest of the world of that time. After all, the moving back of the sun ten degrees on Ahaz’ sundial meant that it had moved on all the sundials in the world. This

1. I Cor. 15:26

2. II Tim. 1:10

3. II Kings 20:5

must have been noticed, particularly, in Babylon, the center of astrology in the world. Like at the appearance of the star of Bethlehem, centuries later, the Babylonians must have asked themselves what caused such a universal phenomenon.

Merodach-Baladan somehow must have found out that the reason for this spectacular spectacle was the healing of the king of Judah. He concluded that, if this man had such a relationship with the Creator of the universe that his God made the sun turn back in its orbit, he was someone to be reckoned with. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states about Merodach-Baladan that he was “a king of the Chaldeans of the house of Yakin, and was the most dangerous and inveterate foe of Sargon and his son Sennecherib, kings of Assyria, with whom he long and bitterly contested the possession of Babylon and the surrounding provinces.” *The Encyclopedia* continues: “According to the monuments, therefore, it was from a worldly point of view good politics for Hezekiah and his western allies to come to an understanding with Merodach-Baladan and the Aramaeans, Elamites, and others, who were confederated with him. From a strategical point of view, the weakness of the allied powers consisted in the fact that the Arabian desert lay between the eastern and western members of the confederacy, so that the Assyrian kings were able to attack their enemies when they pleased and to defeat them in detail.”

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: “That Hezekiah should have received the envoys *gladly* is understandable. It was proper courtesy responding to a kingly gesture. But beyond the gesture lay the *letters*, the hidden agenda. Their contents are not divulged but are plain from the king’s reaction. What must the letters have said if they provoked the response of displaying the resources and armed strength of the kingdom? From such a source as Merodach-Baladan, only one thing: ‘Join me in rebellion’ – and Hezekiah fell for it. It was a clear choice: the promises of God (38:4–8) or the power of man (39:2), and Hezekiah forgot the promises.”

*Barnes’ Notes* adds to this: “Nothing was more probable than that Merodach-baladan, having seized the throne, should endeavor to unite himself in league and amity with the enemies of his master, against whom he had revolted. Hezekiah, who, no less than himself, had thrown off the Assyrian yoke, and was in powerful alliance with the king of Egypt, would be his first resource. No embassy, on the other hand, could be more welcome to the Jewish monarch who had the common enemy in his neighborhood, and who would be glad to see a division made in his favor by a rebellion in the very heart of that enemy’s kingdom. Hence arose that excessive attention which he paid to the envoys of the usurper, and which so offended Isaiah, or rather God, who, as a consequence, threatened the Babylonian captivity.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Isaiah comes, unsummoned, to rebuke the king ... This bold attitude was one which prophets were entitled to take by virtue of their office, which called upon them to bear testimony, even before kings, and to have no respect of persons. A similar fearlessness is apparent in ... Isaiah 7:1-17, where the king with whom Isaiah has to deal was the wicked Ahaz. *What said these men?* ‘These men’ is contemptuous. The demand to know what they said is almost without parallel. Diplomacy, if it is to be successful, must be secret; and Isaiah can scarcely have been surprised that his searching question received no answer. But he was zealous of God’s honor, and anxious that Hezekiah should rely on no ‘arm of flesh,’ whether it were Egypt or Babylon. Such dependence would straiten God’s arm, and prevent him from giving the aid that he was otherwise prepared to give. The desire of the prophet is to warn the king of the danger which he runs by coquetting with human helpers.”

God’s message to Hezekiah comes in the form of a sharp rebuke. Hezekiah had demonstrated the right spiritual attitude in times of need. His prayer when the Assyrians threatened to take Jerusalem and his showing the threatening letter to the Lord were evidence of his trust in the Almighty. In a way, the Assyrian threat had been “His finest hour.”<sup>1</sup> But his miraculous healing and the accompanying sign had caused him to become spiritually proud. Spiritual pride is the worst kind of pride that exists.

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1. Title of Churchill’s book recounting the London Blitz, “Their Finest Hour.”

The initial report of his reign had been favorable. *Second Chronicles* states: "He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done."<sup>1</sup> *Second Kings* is even more complimentary, stating: "Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses." But after God's miraculous intervention in his life, we read: "But Hezekiah's heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore the LORD's wrath was on him and on Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah repented of the pride of his heart, as did the people of Jerusalem; therefore the LORD's wrath did not come upon them during the days of Hezekiah."<sup>2</sup> That last evaluation is the one with which King Hezekiah went down in history.

Isaiah's message is that these Babylonians with whom Hezekiah linked himself will come and conquer Israel and take everyone and everything into captivity. This is the message of "the LORD Almighty." The mention of *Yahweh Tsabaoth*, the Lord of hosts, the supreme commander, reinforces the fact that Hezekiah made the wrong choice. He put his trust in human strength of arms instead of God's omnipotence. He had experienced what God's power could do in the defense of Jerusalem and in the healing of his body. But the conclusion he drew from that was that God had paid special attention to him, because he was a special person who merited such attention.

The message of this chapter seems to be that, more than anyone else, Hezekiah was responsible for the tragedy of the Babylonian captivity that would be the end of the house of David in a physical sense. His repentance may have postponed the disaster, but it did not stop it. Shortly afterward Manasseh would be born, who would become the worst king Israel ever had. He would bring to full development in acts of evil what his father had sown in spiritual pride.

Hezekiah's reaction to Isaiah's message seems to have been one of indifference: "It will not happen during my lifetime." As if he wanted to say: "Who cares about the future?"

## VI. UNIVERSAL CONSOLATION (40:1 – 42:17)

### a. Consolation for the Lord's people (40:1–41:20)

#### i. The message of comfort (40:1–11)

**1** *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.*

**2** *Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.*

**3** *A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.*

**4** *Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.*

**5** *And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."*

**6** *A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.*

**7** *The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass.*

**8** *The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever."*

**9** *You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"*

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1. II Chron. 29:2

2. II Chron. 32:25,26

***10 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.***

***11 He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.***

In the fortieth chapter of Isaiah we reach the mountain peak of poetry. This is the Mount Everest of world literature. *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes: “So far as the language is concerned, there is nothing more finished or more elevated in the whole of the Old Testament than this trilogy of addresses by Isaiah. In ch. 1-39 of the collection, the prophet’s language is generally more compressed, chiseled, plastic, although even there his style passes through all varieties of color. But here in ch. 40-66, where he no longer has his foot upon the soil of his own time, but is transported into the far distant future, as into his own home, even the language retains an ideal and, so to speak, ethereal character. It has grown into a broad, pellucid, shining stream, which floats us over as it were into the world beyond, upon majestic yet gentle and translucent waves. There are only two passages in which it becomes more harsh, turbid, and ponderous, viz., ch. 53 and Isa 56:9-57:11a. In the former it is the emotion of sorrow which throws its shadow upon it; in the latter, the emotion of wrath. And in every other instance in which it changes, we may detect at once the influence of the object and of the emotion. In Isa 63:7 the prophet strikes the note of the liturgical tephillâh; in Isa 63:19 b - 64:4 it is sadness which chokes the stream of words; in Isa 64:5 you hear, as in Jer 3:25, the key-note of the ... confessional prayer.”

This chapter is usually considered the watershed of the book, as if the prophet turns a page and begins a new subject. But in the division we follow, according to Motyer’s outline, it is still part of the prophecy that foretells the Babylonian captivity. It is against the background of this event that Isaiah’s words of comfort are spoken. These are the verses of Scripture those who would be led away in captivity were to take with them.

In a general introduction to these chapters J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “The message of comfort begins where the need for it is sharpest. The situation fits with what we know of Isaiah, who, following his word to the king regarding exile to Babylon, would inevitably find himself at the sharp end of questioning by his discipleship group (8:16): if the days of the monarchy are numbered – all deported to Babylon and the males of the royal family eunuchs – what about the great royal promises which have been the substance of the prophet’s ministry to date (e.g. 9:1–6; 11:1–16)? Plainly Isaiah must either tear up his earlier prophecies or else seek further truth regarding the future. Further truth indeed he did seek, and he sets it out in a beautifully balanced statement: three voices proclaim promises of comfort (40:1–11); the promises are then guaranteed by the nature of the Lord who, as Creator (40:12–31), rules the whole creation and cannot forget his people (40:25–31) and, as Lord of history (41:1–7), directs the whole historical process, raising up the world’s rulers (41:1–4), and exposing the world’s idolatries (41:5–7); finally, matching the three voices (40:3–11), there are three picture of consolation (41:8–20).”

*The Pulpit Commentary* introduces this section, incorporating a quotation from the book *Prophecies of Isaiah*, by Cheyne: “The Assyrian struggle is over. The prophet has accepted into the depths of his spirit God’s announcement that the true spoiler, ‘the rod of his anger, and the staff of his indignation,’ is not Assyria, but Babylon. He has accepted the sentence that his people is to go into captivity. Into this future of his nation he throws himself with a faith, a fervor, and a power of realization, which are all his own. ‘The familiar scenes and faces, among which he has hitherto lived and labored, have grown dim and disappeared. All sounds and voices of the present are hushed, and move him no more. The present has died out of the horizon of his soul’s vision ... The voices in his ears are those of men unborn, and he lives a second life among events and persons, sins and suffering, and fears and hopes, photographed sometimes with the minutest accuracy on the sensitive and sympathetic medium of his own spirit; and he becomes the denouncer of the special sins of a distant generation, and the spokesman of the faith and hope and passionate yearning of an exiled nation, the descendants of men living, when he wrote, in the profound peace of a renewed prosperity.’ ”

Commenting on the conversation between Isaiah and Hezekiah that precedes this chapter, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, makes the following interesting observation about Isaiah's prophecy: "It is not greatly questioned nowadays that Old Testament includes prediction, but what is rightly queried is bare prediction – a mere forecast of the future designed to satisfy our curiosity about 'what is going to happen.' The forecast must (a) emerge from the current situation and (b) speak relevantly to that situation. John the Baptist's cry, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near' (Mt. 3:2), is a perfect example: he addressed his contemporaries; he told them of the future; he made the future bear on the present. Plainly Isaiah's word to Hezekiah fits this framework. First, Isaiah did not snatch the name *Babylon* out of the air. The king spoke it to him before he spoke it back to the king. Isaiah has no option but to comment on it. Secondly, his message about Babylon has a direct bearing on the present: to depart from the way of faith is to walk in the way of destruction (7:9). Babylon will be destruction. Thirdly, Babylon was part of the current map of the world. It was where already a viable alternative to Assyrian dominance had been established. Merodach-Baladan had credentials as a world-beater. If Hezekiah interpreted the prediction as a fairly prompt future Babylonian captivity, there was nothing in the current political scene to contradict the possibility. But this brings us, fourthly, to the fact that we are actually requiring Isaiah to predict something which lay in the remote future, over a century off, and this point would appear to have even greater force if we count the 'Comfort' of 40:1ff. as the actual words of Isaiah. Where is the 'comfort' in saying that everything will be fine in 170 years' time? But just ask another question: where does Isaiah say anything about 'over a century' or 'in 170 year's time'? We know by hindsight of the passage of the years; the prophet says nothing of it, maybe even was ignorant of it! Right from the time of his call he knew there was a dark power in the offing which would destroy Zion and carry off its people (6:11–13); he came to know that Assyria would not be this power (10:5–15; 14:24–27; 29:1–8; 30:31–33); maybe it was at this very moment that the name of the 'dark power' was revealed, when Hezekiah said 'Babylon'! Isaiah probes no further: that is where they are going and from where (48:20–21) they will in due course come back. The message of the future, both in judgment and mercy, is inevitable as the prophet faces the king."

The Hebrew word, translated "comfort" is *nacham*, which means literally "to sigh." According to the context it can mean "to be sorry," "to pity," or "to console." The first time the word is used in Scripture is at the birth of Noah. We read: "He named him Noah and said, 'He will *comfort* us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed.'" <sup>1</sup> We know now that the comfort Noah brought was in the salvation of one family at the time of the greatest disaster that every hit the earth. Another context in which we find the same word is in the verse: "The LORD was *grieved* that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain."<sup>2</sup> Comfort is only effective in painful situations that require it. The destruction of Zion certainly was such a condition. The Apostle Paul calls God: "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort," but he says this in the context of "the sentence of death." We read: "Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."<sup>3</sup>

It is nigh to impossible for us to imagine what the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple must have meant to those who were led into captivity. For them it was the equivalent of "God is dead." It appeared that God's revelation on earth had come to a complete and final end. The ark about which God had said to Moses: "There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites"<sup>4</sup> had disappeared and the

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1. Gen. 5:29
  2. Gen. 6:6
  3. See II Cor. 2:3,9.
  4. Ex. 25:22

magnificent building that housed it lay in ruin. In a way the picture was a vivid illustration of what would happen centuries later when God literally died on a cross on Golgotha.

Yet, it was during this seventy-year period that God revealed Himself to His prophets more clearly than He had ever done before. The visions of Ezekiel have never been surpassed by any other parts in Scripture. And Daniel saw more of God than any of the other prophets. The destruction of the temple was not a step back in divine revelation; it was a step forward toward the time when, in Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman: "the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."<sup>1</sup>

How painful the captivity was to God Himself is revealed in what God said to Baruch, Jeremiah's secretary: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to you, Baruch: You said, 'Woe to me! The LORD has added sorrow to my pain; I am worn out with groaning and find no rest.' [The LORD said,] 'Say this to him: 'This is what the LORD says: I will overthrow what I have built and uproot what I have planted, throughout the land. Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not. For I will bring disaster on all people, declares the LORD, but wherever you go I will let you escape with your life.'"<sup>2</sup> God's pain was greater than Baruch's and greater than the pain of those who went into captivity. We could say that God needed the comfort as much or even more than the people. He looked forward to the resurrection as much, or even more than we do.

The captivity certainly was a punishment for Israel's sin, but the greatest punishment for the sins of the world, God would bear Himself. As *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* keenly observes: "Double perhaps refers to (a) the temporal punishment of the seventy years of captivity, (b) the eternal punishment visited upon the person of Christ the sin-bearer on Calvary."

As we saw above *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* sees this last part of Isaiah's book as a trilogy of messages. *The Commentary* observes that "the distinctive characteristics of the three separate parts are exhibited in the three clauses of Isa 40:2: 'that her distress is ended, that her debt is paid, that she has received ... double for all her sins.' For the central point of the first part is really the termination of the Babylonian distress; that of the second, the expiation of guilt by the self-sacrifice of the Servant of Jehovah; and that of the third, the assurance that the sufferings will be followed by 'a far more exceeding weight of glory.' The promise rises higher and higher in the circular movements of the 3 × 9 addresses, until at length it reaches its zenith in ch. 65 and 66, and links time and eternity together. And when we turn to the contents of his trilogy, it is more incomparable still. It commences with a prophecy, which gave to John the Baptist the great theme of his preaching. It closes with the prediction of the creation of a new heaven and new earth, beyond which even the last page of the New Testament Apocalypse cannot go. And in the center (Isa 52:13 - 53) the sufferings and exaltation of Christ are proclaimed as clearly, as if the prophet had stood beneath the cross itself, and had seen the Risen Savior. He is transported to the very commencement of the New Testament times, and begins just like the New Testament evangelists. He afterwards describes the death and resurrection of Christ as completed events, with all the clearness of a Pauline discourse. And lastly, he clings to the heavenly world beyond, like John in the Apocalypse. Yet the Old Testament limits are not disturbed; but within those limits, evangelist, apostle, and apocalypticist are all condensed into one."

As the above comment indicates the comfort God instructs Isaiah to proclaim to the people is one that reaches well beyond the horizon of Isaiah's day. It encompasses all of world history and ends up in eternity when "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."<sup>3</sup>

"Speak tenderly" is the rendering of the Hebrew *al-leeb*, which literally means "to the heart." *The Hebrew Interlinear Bible* renders it "comfortably," making it sound like the "comfort" of v.1.

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1. John 4:23,24
  2. Jer. 45:2-5
  3. Rev. 7:17; 21:4

We do well to remind ourselves that, however comforting these words may sound, the outward circumstances would not change because of them. When God called Moses and said: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey — the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” and Moses went to Pharaoh, the immediate result was increase of hardship. We read: “The Israelite foremen realized they were in trouble when they were told, ‘You are not to reduce the number of bricks required of you for each day.’ When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them, and they said, ‘May the LORD look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

God’s promises do not change the circumstances, they change the people who believe the promises. In her book *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom describes the conditions of the Nazi concentration camp in which she and her sister were incarcerated and where her sister died. She writes in her book *The Hiding Place*: “More than conquerors... It was not a wish. It was a fact. We knew it, we experienced it minute by minute—poor, hated, hungry. We are more than conquerors. Not ‘we shall be.’ We are! Life in Ravensbrück took place on two different levels, mutually impossible. One, the observable, external life, grew every day more horrible. The other, the life we lived with God, grew daily better, truth upon truth, glory upon glory.” It was the promise of the Lord that made Paul and Silas sing in prison in the middle of the night, with their feet shackled and their backs bleeding.<sup>2</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says about the message of comfort: “Three unnamed voices obey the call to *comfort my people* (1). The first voice (3–5) says that *our God* is coming to reveal his glory worldwide; the third voice (9–11) brings this message to bear on Zion: the coming Lord is the shepherd who will gather his people and lead them home; the second voice affirms the enduring quality of God’s word: he has promised universal revelation (5) and good news for Zion (9) and his word will not fail. These truths summarize the whole message of chapters 40 – 55. The Lord has an interim plan for the consolation of his exiles in Babylon (43:14; 44:24 – 45:7; 48:20–21), but he also has a second plan, bringing his word and salvation to them and to the whole world (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 55:1–13).”

Vv.3 and following seem to indicate that the prophecy would have its fulfillment at the end of the Babylonian captivity. As such it parallels Jeremiah’s letter to the captives, stating that the captivity would last 70 years.<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah’s prophecy inspired Daniel to pray for Israel’s return from captivity to Palestine.<sup>4</sup> Most Bible scholars see Isaiah’s vision here as a prediction of this return. But it is obvious that the end of the Babylonian captivity exemplifies more than this one historical event alone. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “The implication here is that Jehovah was to return to Jerusalem through the desert route by which the exiles would return from Babylon, and that a fitting preparation for his advent would be the removal of obstacles and the smoothing out of a highway. But from Matthew’s application of this verse to the ministry of John the Baptist (Matt 3:3), it is apparent that these geographical features symbolize the arid lifelessness of the unconverted soul. The hills therefore represent the carnal pride of the sinner, and the valleys his moods of carnal hopelessness and self-pity ... The glory of Jehovah (ASV) was to be revealed through (a) Cyrus’ liberation of the exiles from Babylonian captivity and their restoration to the land of promise; (b) Christ’s liberation of Satan’s bond-slaves and their adoption into the family of God. ... All

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1. See Ex. 3:7-10; 5:19-21
  2. Acts 16:22-25
  3. Jer. 25:11,12; 29:10
  4. Dan. 9:1-3

mankind are to witness this divine intervention on behalf of the redeemed people.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* also connects the physical event to man’s spiritual condition, stating: “It was in the moral wilderness that the way of the Lord was to be prepared; and it was in the literal wilderness that John preached.”

Isaiah’s prophecy is ultimately addressed to us as it applies to the coming of Jesus Christ. That is the way the Gospel writers understood it when they quoted the words of John the Baptist. Matthew reports: “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: ‘A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ’ ”<sup>1</sup> And Mark’s Gospel starts out by quoting both Malachi<sup>2</sup> and Isaiah, saying: “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way’— ‘a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ’ ”<sup>3</sup> The slight change between Isaiah’s text and the quotations does not alter the contents of the message. In Isaiah’s words it is the way to be prepared that leads through the wilderness; in the Gospels the crier finds himself in the desert, which was the place where John the Baptist resided, not only physically but also spiritually, as we all do.

*The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes: “Who the crier is remains concealed; his person vanishes in the splendor of his calling, and falls into the background behind the substance of his cry. The cry sounds like the long-drawn trumpet-blast of a herald.” This concurs with John’s own testimony: “A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.”<sup>4</sup>

The preparation of the way for the coming of the Lord can hardly be taken to mean that mountains would literally be torn down and valleys filled. We may assume that mountains and valleys have been part of God’s original creation of our planet and that He pronounced them “good.” Moses’ statement: “Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God,”<sup>5</sup> attributes some eternal beauty to the mountains God created. Since this call for road construction is a call for repentance, as the Gospels indicate, we may suppose that the mountains and the valleys are emotional things in the human heart. They are our “ups and downs” that have to be prepared for the coming of the Lord. Isaiah spoke of this highway earlier when he said: “And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”<sup>6</sup> These verses reveal that actually it is God who does the road building. All we have to do for His coming is to be prepared. The “highway for our God” is the road on which we will travel if we walk with Him. And the way all mankind will see the glory of the LORD is through us. Although the Apostle Paul conceals this in a negative statement about judgment, he shows the way God will reveal His glory. We read: “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence

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1. Matt. 3:1-3
  2. See Mal. 3:1.
  3. Mark 1:1-3
  4. John 3:27-30
  5. Ps. 90:2
  6. Isa. 35:8-10

of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.”<sup>1</sup>

Vv.6-8 show the human reaction to the revelation of God’s glory. When Isaiah was first confronted with God’s glory, he cried: “Woe to me! I am ruined!”<sup>2</sup> It is the disclosure of God’s magnificence that makes us realize our transience. The introductory words “A voice says, ‘Cry out.’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ ” may sound strange to us, but they translate well the shock of amazement in reaction to the coming of God’s glory. What can we, mortals, say to the Eternal?

Isaiah’s words are a free quotation of David’s Psalm: “As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew text reads literally “All flesh is grass.” The Hebrew word *basar* refers to the human body. We find it the first time in the verse: “So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh.”<sup>4</sup>

Isaiah’s conclusion is: “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.” This differs from David’s conclusion: “But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children — with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, the two statements run parallel. The Apostle Peter, in quoting Isaiah’s words, links the prophecy to the Gospel message, saying: “And this is the word that was preached to you.”<sup>6</sup> The Apostle John adds a third facet to this gem of truth, saying: “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”<sup>7</sup> The flower and the grass refer not to the human soul, but to the body. The withering grass and fallen flower depict the death of the body. Our fear of God will clothe us with the righteousness of Jesus Christ and will make us share in the resurrection of His incorruptible and glorious body. The coming of God’s glory reminds us not only of our own transience, but also of our glorious eternity.

The good news that must be shouted from the mountain tops is that the captivity, the destruction of Jerusalem and the death of the temple, even the death of Jesus on the cross is not the end of the story; it is the beginning. It prepares the way for the glory of the Lord to be revealed.

Isaiah’s prophecy is not just a word of comfort for those who would be led into captivity, it was also meant for those who would return to Jerusalem and face the rubble. To the small group who returned and who tried to rebuild the altar and the temple under the leadership of Joshua and Zerubbabel these words must have sounded incongruent to the conditions they were facing. They and those who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah could discern little of the glory of the Lord that could be seen by all mankind (v.5) or of the coming of the Sovereign LORD with power (v.10). It must have taken a lot of faith in the Word of God for those people under those circumstances. It must have taken the same faith for them as it does for us in the world in which we live today. Yet, in spite of their dismal circumstances and the seemingly faulty fulfillment of God’s promises these people did what they were supposed to do. The author of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* commends them for their faith and says: “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”<sup>8</sup> And even we have not been made perfect yet. The great

1. II Thess. 1:8-10
2. Isa. 6:5
3. Ps. 103:15,16
4. Gen. 2:21
5. Ps. 103:17,18
6. I Peter 1:25
7. I John 2:17
8. Heb. 11:39,40

event is still to come. The Sovereign LORD will come with power, and his arm will rule for Him. He will come with His reward and His accompanying recompense. He already tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young (vv.10,11). But the best is still to come.

ii. God the Creator, guarantor of his promises (40:12–31)

*12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?*

*13 Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor?*

*14 Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?*

*15 Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.*

*16 Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.*

*17 Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.*

*18 To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?*

*19 As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it.*

*20 A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.*

*21 Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded?*

*22 He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in.*

*23 He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.*

*24 No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.*

*25 "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.*

*26 Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.*

*27 Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"?*

*28 Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.*

*29 He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.*

*30 Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;*

*31 but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

Here we are on top of Mount Everest; we have reached the peak. This prophetic poem is the summit of beauty and truth. It puts every Word of God in its proper perspective because the whole of creation of heaven and earth testify to its truth.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes about this section: "This wonderful poem moves to a climax in verses 27–31, the security of *Jacob/Israel* under such a God: this sovereignly wise Creator-God (12–14) blends all things exactly together (12); in his greatness (15–17) he dominates creation and its peoples (17);

he alone is God (18–20); he rules (21–24) all earthly ‘powers’ (23), and controls (25–26) creation down to the last detail (26). So how then can *Jacob/Israel*, his very own people, be forgotten (27) or be left without strength (31)? This is one of the central Old Testament passages on the doctrine of creation. It teaches that the physical fabric of creation is a direct artifact of the Creator: *dust* and *waters* (12) have been weighed and measured out in his hand. The presence of organized human strength (*nations*, 15, 17) makes no difference to the Creator’s absolute sovereignty over his creation. The Creator God is the sole God (18–20), compared to whom all claimants to deity are but the product of human skill (19–20). The Creator presides over the inhabited world (22) and rules earth’s rulers (23–24). With attention to detail he decrees the movements of the cosmos (26). In one way or another the fourfold Old Testament doctrine of God the Creator is presented here: he originates everything, maintains everything in existence, controls everything in operation, and directs everything to the end he appoints.”

As human beings we live in a universe the extent of which surpasses our ability to measure. We live on a planet the data of which we cannot catalogue. No human mind can comprehend the distance between the ends of the cosmos. No one can determine how many gallons of water are on planet earth or how many grains of sand even one of our ocean beaches contains. The very fact that, in Jesus’ words, “even the very hairs of your head are all numbered”<sup>1</sup> is more than we can comprehend. Isaiah places us on top of this mountain peak by bringing us down to earth in this comparison between God’s statistics and ours. In our relationship with God, as creatures with our Creator, we must be constantly reminded who the One is with whom we are dealing.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states about vv.12-14: “The contrast between *waters* and *dust*, *heavens* and *earth* exemplifies the Hebrew idiom of ‘totality expressed by contrast.’ This Creator God is the creator of all. *Measured ... marked out ... held ... weighed* the whole creation is precision work with every component present to the exact amount. *Marked off* is the verse we would use to express ‘fine tuning.’ *Hollow ... breadth ... basket ... scales ... balance*: in human terms are the measures we use for small-scale working, here they underline the immensity of the Creator in comparison to his creation.”

V.12 compares God’s hand to the human hand. Even the biggest human handful of some matter is a small amount. We only use handfuls to measure small quantities. God holds the oceans of the world in His hand and adds all the mountain ranges to it. “He has the whole wide world in His hand.” It is this hand about which Jesus says: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”<sup>2</sup>

To be kept in God’s hand would be little comfort if we could not trust the one to whom the hand belongs. To be in someone’s hand is usually not a positive experience. David understood this when he said: “Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men.”<sup>3</sup>

V.13 speaks about the mind of the Lord. The Hebrew text reads literally: “Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord or being His counselor has taught Him?” The Hebrew word translated “mind” is *ruwach*, which usually is rendered “spirit.” If the hand of God already brings us to the overwhelming realization of God’s greatness, how much more the Spirit of the Lord, His mind? We can look at the human hand and be amazed. We can dissect the hand and study its parts and the way it operates. But we cannot do this with the human mind. We use our mind to understand what the hand does but we cannot understand the mind itself. How much more the mind of God! We speak of some human beings as being brilliant and we say: “What a brain!” We admire Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Bach, Beethoven or Einstein, but what about the Creator of the minds of these people? We ought to know enough about the mystery of ourselves to understand how great and beyond understanding God is who created the mystery. If we acknowledge with

1. Matt. 10:30
2. John 10:27-30
3. II Sam. 24:14

David: “O LORD, you have searched me and you know me”<sup>1</sup> we ought to pursue Paul’s quest: “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”<sup>2</sup>

As *The Pulpit Commentary* observes about v.15, “From nature we pass to history.” From significance we pass to insignificance. *The Commentary* states: “If God is so great, so apart and by himself in relation to the material universe, what is he in relation to man? What are nations, compared to him, but ‘as a drop from a bucket,’ which drips from it, and is of no account? What are they, but as the small dust of the balance, which lies on it but does not disturb its equilibrium?”

That is not the way the nations of the earth consider themselves. We ascribe power and significance to the nations of this world. We determine the balance of power by the nuclear potential of each nation. The fact that the more nations unite the less powerful they become does not seem to bother anybody. The body called “The United Nations” is a case in point. We believe in the awesome human ability to split the atom and release its power and forget the One who created the atom and holds it together, “sustaining all things by his powerful word.”<sup>3</sup> And when “the kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One, the One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.”<sup>4</sup> The futility of all human power that opposes God could not be better expressed than as “a drop in a bucket” and “as dust on the scales.” No superpower tips God’s scales. The Hebrew text reads the last part of v.15: “He takes up the isles as a very little thing.” The Hebrew word *daq* comes from a word meaning “crushed.” We find it in the verse that describes what the high priest had to do on the Day of Atonement: “He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of *finely ground* fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain.”<sup>5</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on v.16: “From organized humanity, Isaiah moves to religious humanity. There is nothing we can do which would adequately match the greatness of the Creator – not even were we to make all Lebanon a fire and all its animals a holocaust (Ps. 50:9-13). In verse 15 we are under his power; in verse 16, he is beyond our power. Nothing we can do puts him in our debt or at our disposal. This is the death-knell to all ‘do-it-yourself’ systems of salvation. Over every human effort to move God, to meet his demands, satisfy his requirement, maneuver him to our advantage and climb into his ‘good books,’ Isaiah simply writes, ‘Not enough.’ ” The embedded Scripture reference of Ps. 50 reads: “I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?”

The crucial and central question is “To whom, then, will you compare God?” God is the incomparable One in the line of deities. In heaven He sits enthroned among the heavenly beings, the ones He created. David sang: “The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all. Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will.”<sup>6</sup> And when the Apostle John was allowed a glance in heaven, he reported: “There before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of

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1. Phil. 3:10,11
  2. Ps. 139:1
  3. Heb. 1:3
  4. See Ps. 2:2,4.
  5. Lev. 16:12
  6. Ps. 103:19-21

lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’ ”<sup>1</sup> Everyone in heaven recognizes God’s supremacy. Even the ones who are created in his image and likeness, who resemble Him most, “lay their crowns before the throne and say: ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.’ ”<sup>2</sup>

In heaven where reality is seen at its clearest there is no question about to whom God can be compared; the confusion is on earth. In a later chapter Isaiah will pour out the full measure of his sarcasm upon those who make idols and worship them.<sup>3</sup> Here he merely refers to idol statues as the product of human ingenuity, gods made in the image of man. Two kinds of statues are mentioned, ones made of precious metal and wooden ones. There is some sarcasm in the use of the words “rot” and “topple.” It is obvious that a living human being is superior to a piece of metal or wood. When man stoops to what is less than he is he degrades himself. And if an idol is less than man, how much lesser it is than God!

Isaiah introduces vv.21-24 with a triple question: “Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told?” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments here: “*Have ye not known?* Hitherto the prophet has restrained himself, and confined himself to quiet sarcasm. Now he bursts out. Is there any one so insensate, so devoid of natural reason and understanding, as not to know what has been known to all from the beginning — yea, from the foundations of the earth — by ‘the light that is in them,’ viz. that God is something wholly different from this? — that he is such a One as the prophet proceeds to describe in vers. 22-24, alike above nature and above man, Lord of heaven and earth, and absolute Disposer of the fates of all men? *Hath it not been told you?* If ye have not known the nature of God by the light of nature, has it not come down to you by tradition? Have not your fathers told it you? Has it not been handed on by sire to son from the very foundation of the earth? The appeal is to men generally, not especially to Israel. *Have ye not understood, etc.?* Some omit the preposition after ‘understood,’ and render the passage thus: ‘Have ye not understood the foundations of the earth?’ *i.e.* how it was founded, or created — that its creation was God’s sole act?”

The Apostle Paul links idolatry to man’s failure to find God in creation. We read: “What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”<sup>4</sup>

Human beings in these verses have grown from a speck of dust to grasshoppers. That was the word the spies who went to Canaan to spy out the country used to describe themselves. They said: “All the people we saw there are of great size ... We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”<sup>5</sup> Here God uses the term to express what He thinks of the princes and rulers of this world. The powerful men and important people of this earth are like insects to God.

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1. Rev. 4:2-8
  2. Rev. 4:10,11
  3. See Isa. 44:13-19.
  4. Rom. 1:19-23
  5. Num. 13:32,33

In God's original plan of creation every human being was under the sole and direct authority of God Himself; there was no government in which one man ruled over another. Human authority was over the non-human part of creation. "You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas."<sup>1</sup> It was after the entrance of sin in the world that God established governments. The problem with many people in places of authority is that they do not recognize the origin of their mandate. Kings, princes or presidents behave as if the source of their power is in themselves. It is about those that Asaph says in one of his psalms: "To the arrogant I say, 'Boast no more,' and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up your horns. Do not lift your horns against heaven; do not speak with outstretched neck.' No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another."<sup>2</sup> It is the arrogant people in authority that God blows away. Those who carry weight on earth are like empty hulls in the eyes of God. The first psalm states: "Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."<sup>3</sup> Only righteousness carries any weight with God.

In v.18 it was Isaiah who asked: "To whom, then, will you compare God?" In v.25 it is God who asks the question: "To whom will you compare me?" He is the God of the heavens, the Creator of the universe. We do not know how much the stargazers in Isaiah's time knew about the universe. They may not have known that our solar system is one of millions of others. If our knowledge is greater and more complete, our awe of the One who created all the universes ought to be greater also. One glance at the stars and planets that are visible to the naked eye, one thought about the light-years that separates us from them, ought to be enough to make us realize who we are in comparison with the One who "who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name." We echo David's words: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"<sup>4</sup>

The One who asks the question is called "the Holy One." J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on this: "Holiness and creation often appear side by side (Ps. 104:24–25; cf. 93:5). It is as if the Old Testament found it impossible to meditate on the Creator and world Ruler without moving intuitively to the holiness of his rule over the earth. So it is here. Certainly the Lord's holiness lifts him out of the realm of comparison with any other, but is this also a word in season for Israel? In their earthly need, they can rest in their Creator's sovereign care, trust his sovereign wisdom and so on, but it is always the sovereignty of *the Holy One*; part of what they need to understand in their plight is that their guiltiness before such a God merits his holy wrath and requires their penitence. There is a demanding moral dimension in living in the Creator's world."

God's invitation to look at the sky at night reminds us of what God said to Abraham: " 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars — if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."<sup>5</sup> If we can look at the stars and link what we see to God's promises, the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ will be credited to us.

One glance at the universe in which we live ought to give us understanding that the God who created this is a great God, almost too great for our small problems. But David understood the God who sets His glory above the heavens, also ordained praise or power from the lips of children and infants.<sup>6</sup> It is the

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1. Ps. 8:6-8
  2. Ps. 75:4-7
  3. Ps. 1:4-6
  4. Ps. 8:3,4
  5. Gen. 15:5,6

God who calls the stars each by their name, who counts the hair on our heads. He is the Creator of the stars and planets and of the molecules and atoms. Nothing is too great or too small for Him. Human beings may be too big to bother about details; God never is.

This is the theme of the last five verses of this great chapter. The problem of some people is that their God is too small; for most of us God is too great. That makes us believe that God does not know who we are or that He cannot be bothered with our problems. The key phrase in this section is “His understanding no one can fathom.” God knows us better than we know ourselves. It is our faulty and partial knowledge that throws us off. The time will come when we will understand. As the Apostle Paul says: “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”<sup>1</sup> God knows us fully now.

In vv.29-31 God reveals a line that connects us to His eternal energy and vigor. The Hebrew text of v.29 reads literally: “He gives power to the faint and to them who have no might He increases strength.” The Hebrew word *koach* has a variety of meanings. It has a general sense of “vigor,” but it can also mean “substance,” or “wealth.” We find it in the verse in which God says to Cain: “When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its *crops* for you.”<sup>2</sup> Jacob used it in his last words to his sons: “Reuben, you are my firstborn, my *might*, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honor, excelling in power,”<sup>3</sup> giving it a connotation of sexual prowess. And God used it in His warnings to Pharaoh who refused to let His people go: “But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my *power* and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word for “strength” is the feminine word *’otsmah* which indicates “numerousness,” or “abundance.” Isaiah uses it only twice in his book. The other instance is in the condemnation of Babylon: “Both of these will overtake you in a moment, on a single day: loss of children and widowhood. They will come upon you in full measure, in spite of your *many* sorceries and all your potent spells.”<sup>5</sup>

Fellowship with God establishes an umbilical cord between us and His omnipotence. This does not mean that we will feel strong or become strong in ourselves. Our weakness is a precondition to receive God’s strength as God said to the Apostle Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”<sup>6</sup> The strength God gives has nothing to do with our natural vitality. Youth is that season of life in which we reach our full potential of natural vitality. That is not the strength meant here. God’s strength is demonstrated in the power that raised Jesus from the dead. It is the strength about which the Apostle Paul says: “If Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.”<sup>7</sup> And elsewhere the Apostle says: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”<sup>8</sup>

This power has nothing to do with age; it is for youths who grow tired and weary, and for the old alike. The condition for the renewal of strength is to “hope in the LORD.” The Hebrew text reads literally: “But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength.” The Hebrew word *qavah* literally means “to bind together.” The first verse in which this word is used is: “And God said, ‘Let the water under the sky *be*

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6. See Ps. 8:1,2.

1. I Cor. 13:12

2. Gen. 4:12

3. Gen. 49:3

4. Ex. 9:16

5. Isa. 47:9

6. II Cor. 12:9

7. Rom. 8:10,11

8. Phil. 3:10,11

*gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.*’ And it was so.”<sup>1</sup> Hoping in God or waiting for God means becoming one with Him. The miracle of renewal takes place in fellowship with Him. That this is not an easy matter that comes to us naturally is obvious from David’s words: “Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.”<sup>2</sup> If we wait for the Lord we need strength of heart and perseverance.

The image of the eagle flying up beautifully illustrates the way it works. David says in one of his Psalms that God “satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”<sup>3</sup> The renewal of the eagle’s youth is object lesson worthy of note. The eagle renews its youth by molting. It sheds its feathers and then grows new feathers, like a tree that sheds its leaves in the fall to bloom again in spring. God’s satisfying of our desires results in a complete makeover of our old nature and disposition.

The renewing strength God gives us if we fellowship with Him is not just a shot in the arm, but the complete renewal of resurrection from the dead. Flying up with wings like eagles means that we have lost “our old feathers” in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ and that we have been renewed by His resurrection.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: “It is a different strength, as if people become eagles, a strength brought about by transformation; it is divine strength, a strength like the Lord’s own that does not weary or faint (28e). *Run*, the exceptional demands of life; *walk*, the ordinary daily grind.”

iii. God the world ruler, guarantor of his promises (41:1–7)

***1 "Be silent before me, you islands! Let the nations renew their strength! Let them come forward and speak; let us meet together at the place of judgment.***

***2 "Who has stirred up one from the east, calling him in righteousness to his service? He hands nations over to him and subdues kings before him. He turns them to dust with his sword, to windblown chaff with his bow.***

***3 He pursues them and moves on unscathed, by a path his feet have not traveled before.***

***4 Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD — with the first of them and with the last — I am he."***

***5 The islands have seen it and fear; the ends of the earth tremble. They approach and come forward;***

***6 each helps the other and says to his brother, "Be strong!"***

***7 The craftsman encourages the goldsmith, and he who smooths with the hammer spurs on him who strikes the anvil. He says of the welding, "It is good." He nails down the idol so it will not topple.***

About the “islands” *Barnes’ Notes* comments: “This word properly means islands, and is so translated here by the Vulgate, the Septuagint, the Chaldee, the Syriac, and the Arabic. But the word also is used to denote maritime countries; countries that were situated on seacoasts, or the regions beyond ... The word is applied, therefore, to the islands of the Mediterranean; to the maritime coasts; and then, also, it comes to be used in the sense of any lands or coasts far remote, or beyond sea ... Here it is evidently used in the sense of distant nations or lands; the people who were remote from Palestine, and who were the worshippers of idols. The argument is represented as being with them, and they are invited to prepare their minds by suitable reverence for God for the argument which was to be presented.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says: “Isaiah uses the word *iyim* as shorthand for the far reaches of earth.”

The scene is a courtroom in which the nations of the earth are summoned to be judged. “Let the nations renew their strength!” uses the same words as in the previous chapter “but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.” But the strength of the nations is not the same strengths as of those who hope in the Lord. Human power is placed in opposition to the divine power that raised Jesus from the dead. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, however, believes that the “strength” mentioned in both cases has the same

1. Gen. 1:9

2. Ps. 27:14

3. Ps. 103:5

positive meaning. We read: “The expression is the same as in 40:31, ‘put on new strength.’ There it was an invitation to return to a position of undoubting faith and to experience the renewal that faith brings; here it implies that the same way of renewal is open to the whole world: they too are invited to put their trust in the God of Israel and find new strength.” The context, however, seems to suggest that the strength needed by the “islands” is the courage to face God’s judgment, which is not the same as the strength of those who have been renewed by God’s grace.

Vv.2-4 describe the coming of an anonymous conqueror from the east who is called in righteousness to God’s service. *The New International Version* states in a footnote an alternate translation: “whom victory meets at every step.” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “It is generally agreed among moderns that the reference is to Cyrus, who is further referred to in ver. 25, in ... Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-4, 13; and 46:11. Cyrus, whether we regard him as King of Persia, or as King of Elam ... would come from a land lying east of Babylon. ‘Righteousness called him to his foot’ when God, the Righteous One, made him his minister, and gave him a certain task to perform (... Isaiah 44:28).” The point of these verses, however, is not the identity of the coming conqueror but the fact that God called him to fulfill His purpose.

There are different interpretations of this passage in which we will not enter. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “The fact is that any and all views can be accommodated in this non-specific passage while, at the same time, Isaiah is soon going to apply the truths sketched here to the particular example of Cyrus. But it is best to let him spring that on us in his own time and to treat the present verses as mainly exploring a problem in principle: where do would-be conquerors come from (2a)? Whose purposes are they serving (2b)? How are their victories to be explained (2c-3)? In a word, who really rules the world? Is history a meaningless jumble of events or is it a plan in the hands of the master?”

In the context of the courtroom, the introduction of the Judge is the important theme. The ends of the earth are summoned to appear before Him who looks at history in time and space from the viewpoint of eternity. It is this glorious revelation that constitutes judgment for creatures who do not know what the future holds, who do not even control the next minutes and hours of their own lives. Ultimately all judgment comes down to the point that we “fall short of the glory of God.”<sup>1</sup> That is what constitutes our sin. The theme of these verses is God’s glory. He is the Eternal One who spans the ages; who knows and controls the events of the future. And those who appear before Him have determined that they will not surrender to this control.

The best illustration of this rebellious attitude is in the story of the tower of Babel. We read: “Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, ‘Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.’ They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’”<sup>2</sup> In vv.5-7 the same attitude is evinced as among the builders of Babel’s tower. Instead of recognizing who the Judge is before whom they must appear, they take refuge in their own strength, boosted by idols, which are ultimately the tools of the devil. Isaiah puts on his irony quite heavily in these verses. The island dwellers are shaking with fear because they have an inkling about the God who summons them, but they turn to the craftsmen and goldsmiths to help them out.

The irony continues in the description of how the peoples encourage one another. “Be strong” is the rendering of the Hebrew verb *chazaq*, which literally means “to fasten upon.” In the Hebrew text *chazaq* occurs three times: “The craftsman *encourages* the goldsmith,” and “He nails down the idol so it will *not topple*.” The same verb is used in the verse: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will *harden* his heart so

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1. Rom. 3:23

2. Gen. 11:1-4

that he will not let the people go.’<sup>1</sup> The mutual encouragement in the face of the glory of God results in an idol statue that does not fall to the ground! For some people God’s glory hardens their heart.

iv. Three pictures: guaranteed consolations (41:8–20)

**8 "But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend,  
9 I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, 'You are my servant'  
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.**

**10 So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.**

**11 "All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced; those who oppose you will be as nothing and perish.**

**12 Though you search for your enemies, you will not find them. Those who wage war against you will be as nothing at all.**

**13 For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.**

**14 Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O little Israel, for I myself will help you," declares the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.**

**15 "See, I will make you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth. You will thresh the mountains and crush them, and reduce the hills to chaff.**

**16 You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up, and a gale will blow them away. But you will rejoice in the LORD and glory in the Holy One of Israel.**

**17 "The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.**

**18 I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs.**

**19 I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set pines in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together,**

**20 so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the LORD has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, gives us three subdivisions of this section:

1. Victory for the lowly – 41:8-13
2. Transformation for the negligible – 41:14-16
3. Provision for the needy – 41:17-20

Motyer observes about the title *My servant*: “The keyword of chapters 40 – 55 makes its first appearance. Logically we want to know what a *servant* does, but this passage tells us nothing of his task. It tells us, first, that *Israel* came to be the Lord’s *servant* by divine choice (8b, 9d; Eph. 1:4); secondly, that the relationship began with *Abraham, My friend* (2 Ch. 20:7; Jas. 2:23) is literally ‘my loving one’/‘who loved me.’ Thirdly, it tells us that the extension of the covenant promise to Abraham’s *descendants* (lit. ‘seed,’ Gn. 17:7) still stands (*chosen you ... not rejected you*); and, fourthly, that in his choice and calling of Abraham the Lord showed that his power extends to *the ends of the earth ... its farthest corners*. In all this there is nothing of any function the servant may perform; only that Israel has an honored status. In other words, a slave as such is a social nonentity, but before you kick him, ask who his owner is!”

The Hebrew word *ʿebed*, “servant,” is indeed used eighteen times in these chapters. Besides being used for the nation of Israel, we find it applied to the Messiah, as in: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.”<sup>2</sup>

1. Ex. 4:21

Interestingly, the title is not used in connection with Cyrus, although he clearly was the Lord's servant in carrying out God's plan with Israel's remnant.

God's election of Israel, which is emphasized in this chapter, is not primarily for salvation but for the carrying out of the task of proclaiming God's revelation on earth, although, as Motyer observes, that task is not spelled out in these verses. We could say that salvation is a byproduct of this election. The Apostle Paul defines Israel's position as: "Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."<sup>1</sup> Israel's task was ultimately to bring forth the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Isaiah's prophecy here was in due course fulfilled by Mary, who said to the angel who announced to her the birth of Jesus: "I am the Lord's servant ... May it be to me as you have said."<sup>2</sup>

In establishing the relationship between God and Israel, God refers to Abraham as "My friend." We find the Hebrew word *'ahab* which means "to have affection" for the first time in the verse: "Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom *you love*, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.'<sup>3</sup> The application of this word to Abraham after he demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice his son, gives considerable depth to the relationship between God and him. God and Abraham had this in common that both sacrificed their son and this created a bond of intimacy between the two that determined God's relationship to Abraham's offspring. The love of God for Israel was based upon His love for their father.

*"I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you."* A question arises in connection with v.9 about what event it refers to. Some Bible scholars see in it God's call to Abraham to leave Ur, others believe that the exodus from Egypt is meant. None, however, could be called "the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners." Even the return from Babylonian captivity does not completely cover the idea. The fact that this prophecy was uttered before that captivity had occurred makes it even more baffling. We know that, at present, Jews are spread out over the whole service of the earth. God's calling of them does not necessarily imply that they must geographically converge at one place, although some of that has actually happened in the founding of the modern state of Israel.

It seems that these words are meant to be words of comfort for all the horrible experiences of the Jews throughout the centuries, including the captivity, the pogroms and holocaust. God has been calling Jews back to Himself from the corners of the earth and He will continue to do so till the end of times. The Apostle Paul explains: "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.'<sup>4</sup>

God has not rejected Israel and He has not rejected us in as much as we are also the children of Abraham by faith. As Paul writes to the Romans: "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring — not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.' He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed — the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were."<sup>5</sup> And: "Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to

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2. Isa. 42:1
  1. Rom. 9:4,5
  2. Luke 1:38
  3. Gen. 22:2
  4. Rom. 11:25-27
  5. Rom. 4:16,17

Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”<sup>1</sup>

God made Isaiah write these words for people like Elie Wiesel, who writes about his experience in the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz: “Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”<sup>2</sup> God wrote these words for His Son for the time of His crucifixion when He cried out: “ ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’- which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ ”<sup>3</sup> Even the most horrible circumstances are no indication of God’s rejection. This written Word is God’s promise which is worth believing. Fear and dismay are normal reactions to such moments of darkness. Very few of us go through the deepest depths of despair as Elie Wiesel did. But even if we do, God’s promise to uphold us stands. Corrie ten Boom, who went through similar experiences, is a point in case to prove that God is as true as His Word.

As proof of the truth of God’s promise, we are invited to see what happens to those who persecute and oppress God’s children. God says that they will be disgraced and wiped off the surface of the earth. Nothing is left of Nebuchadnezzar’s empire, or Stalin’s Soviet Union, or Hitler’s Nazi Germany.

It is in times of extreme need that God reveals Himself to us as *Yahweh Elohekaa*, “your Elohim.” He takes us by the hand. Asaph expresses this beautifully in one of his Psalms: “Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”<sup>4</sup> And the Apostle Paul asks: “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?”<sup>5</sup> This assurance makes us “more than conquerors through him who loved us.”<sup>6</sup>

The names “worm Jacob” and “little Israel” are not God’s but they are what Israel saw itself to be. In the Psalm Jesus quoted while hanging on the cross, David said: “But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people.”<sup>7</sup> But Jesus says to us: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”<sup>8</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: “Here is a remarkable picture: a *worm* faced with *mountains* and *hills*! An impossible barrier! But the *worm* is transformed into a *threshing-sledge* of such mammoth proportions that the mountains are copped into chaff and carried away on the wind.” Vv.15 and 16 describe our involvement on the Day of Judgment. We may not be aware of this, but God intends to place us on the bench when He pronounces His final verdict. The Apostle Paul says: “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels?”<sup>9</sup> The First Psalm spells out the task we will perform on that day. We read about the wicked and the righteous: “Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.”<sup>10</sup> Those who oppress and persecute people made in the image of God are too shortsighted to see

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1. Gal. 3:6-9
  2. From *Night*, by Elie Wiesel.
  3. Matt. 27:46
  4. Ps. 73:23-26
  5. Rom. 8:31
  6. Rom. 8:37
  7. Ps. 22:6
  8. Luke 12:32
  9. I Cor. 6:2,3
  10. Ps. 1:4,5

the consequences of their acts. God will do more than justify and save us, He will give us authority over His creation, all of it. Jesus says: “Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.”<sup>1</sup> Our being in Christ means partaking in His judgment and His honor. These worms are actually caterpillars that will turn into the most magnificent butterflies this creation has ever seen!

The time will come when God shares His glory with us. The Apostle John says about the New Jerusalem, the bride of Christ, “It shone with the glory of God.”<sup>2</sup> But this glory throws its beams ahead upon our path through life on earth. In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus says to those who have been faithful managers: “Enter into the joy of your lord.”<sup>3</sup> And writing from a prison cell in Rome, the Apostle Paul says to the Christians in Philippi: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” As a matter of fact, this joy is meant to energize us in life on earth, as Nehemiah said to the people of his time: “Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”<sup>4</sup>

Vv.17-20 take us back to the days when Israel was born as a nation, leaving Egypt and traveling to the Promised Land. The desert crossing, which was meant to take only two years, but lasted forty because of people’s disobedience, becomes a picture of our travel to glory. Life on earth is like Israel’s pilgrimage to the land of God’s promise. On our way to glory we thirst for the experience of God’s presence. David expresses this in one of his Psalms: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?”<sup>5</sup>

The Babylonian captivity was another of those desert experiences for God’s children. Daniel thirsted for God as he knelt down three times a day before his window opened to the direction of Jerusalem where the temple used to be.<sup>6</sup>

The Lord gave a similar vision to Isaiah in an earlier chapter in which we see the same transformation of the desert. “The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.”<sup>7</sup> The desert the Israelites crossed after their exodus from Egypt was never physically transformed as these verses describe. The vision is a spiritual one. This is not about physical thirst, dry land and water, but about the satisfaction of our souls. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”<sup>8</sup> In the modern state of Israel there are some physical changes of the land have been brought about by means of irrigation which made the desert bloom. We could see in this a partial fulfillment of this prophecy. But originally, the Promised Land was not meant to be a desert; it was a land flowing with milk and honey.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says about vv.18 and 19: “Water (18) and shade (19) are the two great needs of the desert traveler (Ex. 15:27). None of the trees mentioned are fruit trees: the point is shelter, not sustenance. The trees, also, are all Palestinian, not Mesopotamian, indicating the location of the author. The Lord’s answer to prayer comes by innovation (*rivers on barren heights*), multiplication (*springs* where

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1. John 5:22,23
  2. See Rev. 21:9-11.
  3. Matt. 25:21 (New King James Version).
  4. Neh. 8:10
  5. Ps. 42:1,2
  6. See Dan. 6:10.
  7. Isa. 35:1,2
  8. John 4:13,14

water already flowed in the *valleys*) and transformation (*desert and parched ground becoming pools and springs*). *Together*: ‘all at one,’ a dramatic miracle of provision.”

In connection of these miracles of transformation, Isaiah uses again the title “the Holy One of Israel,” indicating that the transformation is a process of sanctification.

b. Gentile hope (41:21–42:17)

i. Summoned before the court: the plight of the Gentile world (41:21–29)

**21 "Present your case," says the LORD. "Set forth your arguments," says Jacob's King.  
22 "Bring in [your idols] to tell us what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were, so that we may consider them and know their final outcome. Or declare to us the things to come,  
23 tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods. Do something, whether good or bad, so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear.  
24 But you are less than nothing and your works are utterly worthless; he who chooses you is detestable.  
25 "I have stirred up one from the north, and he comes — one from the rising sun who calls on my name. He treads on rulers as if they were mortar, as if he were a potter treading the clay.  
26 Who told of this from the beginning, so we could know, or beforehand, so we could say, 'He was right'? No one told of this, no one foretold it, no one heard any words from you.  
27 I was the first to tell Zion, 'Look, here they are!' I gave to Jerusalem a messenger of good tidings.  
28 I look but there is no one — no one among them to give counsel, no one to give answer when I ask them.  
29 See, they are all false! Their deeds amount to nothing; their images are but wind and confusion.**

In introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “The first two of the three voices of comfort in 40:3–11 had definite universal dimensions: *all mankind ... all men* (40:5–6). The passage on God the Creator and the Lord of history (40:12–31; 41:1–7) both flowed out into assurances for Israel (40:27–31; 41:8–20). Yet the three pictures in 41:8–20 focus completely on *Israel* (8), *Jacob* (14), the ‘exodus people’ under the care of *the God of Israel* (17, 20). So what has happened to the universal dimension? Isaiah has made his readers face the grim reality of belonging to the world outside Israel – in particular the spiritual plight of worshipping man-made gods (40:18–20) and the consequent defenselessness of life on earth with none to turn to but gods who are themselves products of human trembling (41:5–7). But the Creator God, who cannot forget his chosen (40:27ff.), does not forget the wide reaches of his creation, and it is to this topic that Isaiah now turns, revealing how the universal aspects of the message of comfort will be met.”

Although the ones addressed in vv.21-24 are idol worshippers, the ones that are actually interrogated are the idols themselves. God’s speaking to lifeless statues in a tone that expects an answer adds to the sharp irony of this section. This does not deny the fact that there is demonic involvement in idol worship, but it accentuates the human involvement. A statue is, after all, the product of human endeavor.

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments here: “Turning now to idol-worshipping Gentiles, Jehovah challenges them to prove the reality and power of their idols by the test of prophecy and fulfillment (v. 22). His people charge these false gods with being utterly unable to fore-announce their will and purpose, through their prophets, and then carry it out. But Jehovah here and now (v. 25) declares his purpose to raise up - 150 years later - an irresistible conqueror from the east (making his attack from the north), who would respect God’s name and carry out his plan. The imaginary gods of the heathen could accomplish no such feat as this.” None of this future prediction was verifiable to those who lived in the days of Isaiah. The time involved was never mentioned in any of these prophecies. Israel had to look to the past in order to conclude that God’s pronouncements were reliable. The Israel of Isaiah’s day faced the same problem we face regarding prophecies about the return of Christ.

As a matter of fact the question God asks the idols is about what happened in the past. For us humans the past is the only certain knowledge we possess. But the piece of wood that has been given divine authority by man, does not even know what man knows. People who choose to put their trust in such a deity are called “detestable.” The Hebrew word used is *tow`ebah*, which literally means “something morally disgusting.” A choice for idols is a choice against God, which makes it an act of immorality, since it determines everyday behavior. Only those who identify themselves with God will share in His character and become pure in their actions.

Vv.25-29 contain a partial revelation of the future. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, mentions the fact that some Bible scholars believe that these chapters were not part of the original Isaiah manuscript, but that they are from the hand of a prophet who went into captivity and lived in Babylon. The point of view, however, places the speaker in Israel. The conqueror comes from the northeast; he is “one from the rising sun.” From details provided in later prophecies, we learn that Cyrus is meant and that the topic is the return of the captives.

If these words do not originate in Isaiah’s time during the reign of King Hezekiah, they do not possess any supernatural elements and the comparison between God and idols would be empty talk. The point of these verses is that God knows the future and none of the idols do. They not only do not know the future, they do not have a capacity for knowing at all. The Hebrew text reads literally: “Behold, you are of nothing and your work of naught.” The Hebrew word used is *‘ayin*, which “a non-entity.” “Of naught” is the rendering of the Hebrew *‘epha`* meaning “a breath.”

Vv.25-29 continue the comparison between God and idols by providing proof of God’s supremacy in predicting the future. *Barnes’ Notes* comments on this: “In the previous verses God had shown that the idols had no power of predicting future events. He stakes, so to speak, the question of his divinity on that point, and the whole controversy between him and them is to be decided by the inquiry whether they had the power of foretelling what would come to pass. He here urges his claims to divinity on this ground, that he had power to foretell future events. In illustration of this, he appeals to the fact that he had raised up, that is, in purpose, or would afterward raise up Cyrus, in accordance with his predictions, and in such a way that it would be distinctly seen that he had this power of foretelling future events. To see the force of this argument, it must be remembered that the Jews are contemplated as in Babylon, and near the close of their captivity; that God by the prophets, and especially by Isaiah, distinctly foretold the fact that he would raise up Cyrus to be their deliverer; that these predictions were uttered at least a hundred and fifty years before the time of their fulfillment; and that they would then have abundant evidence that they were accomplished. To these recorded predictions and to their fulfillment, God here appeals, and designs that in that future time when they should be in exile, his people should have evidence that He was worthy of their entire confidence, and that even the pagan should see that Yahweh was the true God, and that the idols were nothing. The personage referred to here is undoubtedly Cyrus.”

From a human point of view, at least for the people of Isaiah’s time, God’s arguments had little value. After all, the proof of a prediction is in its fulfillment and confirmation of this prophecy would not be given until one and a half centuries later, at which time no one who initially heard Isaiah’s words would be alive. Yet, we cannot say that Isaiah’s prophecy only served to boost the faith of those who saw its fulfillment. As in the previous chapter, where God revealed Himself as the Lord of heaven and earth, the One who created and commanded the stars and planets of the universe, so here He makes Himself known as the Eternal One, the Creator of time. For us who live within the framework of time, it is difficult to understand that time is a created entity to which God is not subject Himself. God knows what the future holds because He created time and knows its contents. What is a mystery to us is clear as day to Him; He made it. As creatures of time, we cannot comprehend eternity. We think of it in terms of endless time because that is the only thing we can imagine eternity to be. God is timeless and when we enter into His presence we will share in His eternity. For God, Cyrus, who was not born yet in Isaiah’s day, was like a character of the present or the past.

God says that Cyrus would call upon God's Name. Archeological finds about Cyrus both contradict and confirm that Cyrus consciously acted as God's envoy in allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem. It seems to have been his general policy to allow the captives of all deported nations to return to their countries of origin. *The Fausset's Bible Dictionary* states: "The pure monotheism in which Cyrus had been reared as a Persian predisposed him to hate the Babylonian idols and favor the Jewish religion. Zoroaster about this very time reformed the popular nature worship of Persia and represented the sun or fire as only a symbol of the one God. In Cyrus' decree for the Jews' restoration from Babylon he intimates his acquaintance with Isaiah's and Jeremiah's prophecies concerning him, which he doubtless heard from Daniel the prophet of Belshazzar's doom: 'the Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem which is in Judah ... He is the God.' " Some inscriptions, however, suggest that Cyrus asked for the prayers of various local deities to make his reign prosperous. But he may have had political reasons for his requests.

The main purpose for this prophecy, given at a time when the Babylonian captivity was still distant future, seems to be the laying of a foundation of comfort for the future. After all, the theme of this part of Isaiah's book is "Comfort, comfort my people."<sup>1</sup>

ii. The Servant: the great solution (42:1-9)

**1 "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.**

**2 He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.**

**3 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;**

**4 he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope."**

**5 This is what God the LORD says--he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:**

**6 "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,**

**7 to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.**

**8 "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.**

**9 See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you."**

Chapter 42 serves to put Isaiah's predictions in the right perspective. It reveals the purpose and contents of all prophecy. It discloses that all that happened before and all that is going to happen on earth on a political level and in the relationship of nations is a shadow of the reality of the coming Kingdom of God. *Barnes' Notes* mentions five different interpretations of "my servant" in this section, eventually choosing the one that applies it to Christ. There can be no doubt that Isaiah refers here no longer to Cyrus but to the promised Messiah. As the Apostle John explains: "For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."<sup>2</sup> The fact that the Gospel of Matthew quotes these verses as proof of Christ's ministry<sup>3</sup> should alleviate any doubt.

There are slight differences between Isaiah's text and Matthew's quotation that may be hard to explain. Normally, we would ascribe such differences to the fact that most New Testament quotations of Old

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1. Isa. 40:1

2. Rev. 19:10

3. See Matt. 12:18-21.

Testament scripture are taken from *the Septuagint*, but *the Septuagint's* rendering suggests that the nation of Israel was “the servant” mentioned here.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “The law of prophetic suggestion leads Isaiah from Cyrus to the far greater Deliverer, behind whom the former is lost sight of. The express quotation in Matt 12:18-20, and the description, can apply to Messiah alone ... Israel, also, in its highest ideal, is called the ‘servant’ of God (Isa 49:3). But this ideal is realized only in the antitypical Israel, its representative-man and Head, Messiah (cf. Matt 2:15 with Hos 11:1). ‘Servant’ was the position used by the Son of God throughout His humiliation.” The reference from Hosea reads: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” and Matthew’s quotation applies it to the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt, reading: “So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’ ”

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, remarks at the beginning of this chapter: “The NIV fails to bring out the dramatic link between 42:1 and what has preceded. In two parallel passages (41:21–24, 25–29) Isaiah exposed the deadness of idols. Each passage ended with a dramatic summons (Heb. *hm*), ‘Look!’ or ‘Behold!’: verse 24, ‘Look at this! – Meaningless idols!’; verse 29, ‘Look at this! – Pathetic idolaters!’ Now, for the third time, the same word rings out (42:1, *hm*); ‘Look at this! – My Servant!’ ”

The Apostles and the early church applied the term “servant” to Jesus, as is clear from the verses: “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus” and “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.”<sup>1</sup> The term obviously emphasizes both Jesus’ human nature and His obedience. It refers particularly to His sacrificial death in fulfillment of David’s prophecy about Him: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come--it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’ ”<sup>2</sup>

God’s endorsement of the Messiah is beautifully expressed in Isaiah’s choice of words: “whom I uphold,” “my chosen one in whom I delight,” “I will put my Spirit on him.” The word “uphold” is the translation of the Hebrew *tamak*, meaning: “to sustain.” We find the word used in the verse describing Moses’ prayer of intercession during Joshua’s battle with the Amalekites. “When Moses’ hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur *held* his hands *up*--one on one side, one on the other--so that his hands remained steady till sunset.”<sup>3</sup> “Chosen” is the translation of the Hebrew word *bachiyir*, meaning “select.” In the first Psalm of praise David commissioned Asaph to sing to the Lord the term is applied to the whole nation of Israel: “O descendants of Israel his servant, O sons of Jacob, his *chosen ones*.”<sup>4</sup> “In whom My soul delights,” as the Hebrew text reads, is centered on the verb *ratsah*, which means: “to be pleased with,” with the surprising understanding of satisfying a debt. We find it used in connection with the bringing of animal sacrifices: “He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and *it will be accepted* on his behalf to make atonement for him.”<sup>5</sup> We read how this prophecy was applied to and fulfilled in Jesus at the moment of His baptism. *Matthew’s Gospel* records: “At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ ”<sup>6</sup> Evidently, the Father had His Son’s sacrifice in mind when He said these words.

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1. Acts 3:13; 4:27
  2. Ps. 40:6-8
  3. Ex. 17:12
  4. I Chron. 16:13
  5. Lev. 1:4
  6. Matt. 3:16,17

The Father endued the Son with His Spirit. At the creation of man, we read: “the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”<sup>1</sup> When God breathed upon Adam, he became a living being, but he did not receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus imparted the Holy Spirit upon the disciples after His resurrection. We read: “And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”<sup>2</sup> The two acts are similar, the one in which Adam received physical life and the disciples received spiritual life, but they are done on different levels. When the Father breathed in His Son’s nostrils, He received an infinite measure of the Holy Spirit, which enabled Him to be the Savior of the world. John the Baptist testified about Jesus: “For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.”<sup>3</sup>

The ultimate result of the Messiah’s coming in the world will be *mishpat*. *The New International Version* renders this “justice.” The actual meaning of *mishpat* is “a verdict,” or “justice.” Abraham used the word in his prayer for Sodom when he said: “Will not the Judge of all the earth *do right*?”<sup>4</sup>

The whole mystery of Jesus’ coming to be an atonement for the sins of the world is included in these statements. God pronounced His verdict over this world and declared it guilty of murder. The sentence was executed in the Person of Jesus Christ who was put to death by the Romans who crucified Him. Judgment is passed for us and we have “crossed over from death to life.” Jesus has brought justice to the nations and said: “I tell you the truth, [Greek: *Amen, amen*] whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”<sup>5</sup>

In v.1 Isaiah introduces us to the Messiah and explains His mission. In vv.2 and 3 he shows us how He will do this and in v.4 we are shown the result.

V.2 describes not only the way in which Jesus carried out His ministry of teaching and healing but the whole mode of the incarnation. When the Word became flesh there were no sensational manifestations or revelations to the important people of this world. He was not born in the imperial palaces of Rome or even in the home of King Herod the Great. The only time heaven could not contain its joy was when the angels appeared to some shepherds. But shepherds were not considered important witnesses.

Isaiah describes the Messiah as being soft-spoken. When He speaks inside the house His voice cannot be heard in the street. This does not mean that Jesus never raised His voice. John records twice that Jesus shouted. “On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’”<sup>6</sup> And at the resurrection of Lazarus we read: “Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’”<sup>7</sup> We may assume that Jesus was able to make Himself heard as He addressed the crowds without a modern PA system. What Isaiah states here does not pertain to volume but to character. In Matthew’s quotation of Isaiah he renders these words: “He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.”<sup>8</sup> He even wanted to keep His divine identity a secret. We read in *Mark’s Gospel*: “Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, ‘You are the Son of God.’ But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was.”<sup>9</sup>

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1. Gen. 2:7
  2. John 20:22
  3. John 3:34,35
  4. Gen. 18:25
  5. John 5:24
  6. John 7:37,38
  7. John 11:43
  8. Matt. 12:19
  9. Mark 3:11,12

Matthew places the quotation in the context of Jesus' healing a man with a shriveled hand in the synagogue of Capernaum on the Sabbath.<sup>1</sup> In describing Jesus' attitude toward those who suffer, Isaiah uses the two images of a bruised reed and a smoldering wick. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes about these pictures: "The former has been internally damaged, the latter lacks external nourishment of oil. The Servant is competent both to cure and to supply." Bruised is not the same as broken. The picture is of a reed damaged by the wind but not broken off. It speaks of the emotional damage we can sustain by the hardships of life. Jesus experienced this in a measure that was beyond human endurance. Actually, the Hebrew text uses the same word twice, once in describing the reed and once pertaining to the Messiah. *The New International Version* reads: "He will not falter or be *discouraged*." But Isaiah would say in a later chapter about Him: "It was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer."<sup>2</sup> *Barnes' Notes* states: "The sense is, that he will have an affectionate regard for the broken-hearted, the humble, the penitent, and the afflicted. Luther has well expressed this: 'He does not cast away, nor crush, nor condemn the wounded in conscience, those who are terrified in view of their sins; the weak in faith and practice, but watches over and cherishes them, makes them whole, and affectionately embraces them.' " And *Matthew Henry's Commentary* adds: "Jesus Christ is very tender toward those that have true grace, though they are but weak in it, and accepts the willingness of the spirit, pardoning and passing by the weakness of the flesh." Jesus does not shoot us when we are wounded in life. He shows us His love and compassion.

The bruised reed image applies to both physical and emotional suffering, the latter often being the heaviest. The fact that Jesus does not break the bruised reed does not always mean that perfect healing, either physical or emotional will take place. In some cases God will allow pain to remain, but He will add His grace to make it bearable. He did this for the Apostle Paul, who testified about his "thorn in the flesh": "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." Joni Erickson-Tada, who broke her neck and is confined to a wheelchair, testifies that she thanks God for her wheelchair and would not want it any other way. But this does not mean that God never heals.

A wick only smolders when the lamp runs out of oil. The image speaks of a spiritual reality, oil being often a picture of the Holy Spirit in Scripture. If the reed speaks of our humanity and human relations, the oil points to our relationship with God. God is ready to supply us with enough of Himself to make us wait for the coming of the bridegroom. Jesus says: "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"<sup>3</sup>

What Jesus does for us are not just acts of kindness; they are acts of justice. The Hebrew text actually reads: "He shall not fail nor be discouraged till he have set judgment in the earth: and for his law the isles shall wait." The Hebrew word *mishpat*, rendered "justice" means "a verdict." Jesus explained the meaning of this to His disciples when, speaking about the Holy Spirit, He said: "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned."<sup>4</sup> The basis for God's tender mercies toward us is the condemnation of the prince of this world. When the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, we realize that we have been on the wrong side of the fence. Confession of sin means switching sides. And so God can pour out His grace upon us.

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1. See Matt. 12:9-14.
  2. Isa. 53:10
  3. Luke 11:13
  4. John 16:8-11

The Hebrew text of vv.3b and 4 reads literally: “Unto truth he shall bring forth judgment. He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment on the earth.” *The Living Bible* gives these verses a slightly different twist by applying the encouragement to those who are bruised: “He will not break the bruised reed, nor quench the dimly burning flame. He will encourage the fainthearted, those tempted to despair. He will see full justice given to all who have been wronged. He won’t be satisfied until truth and righteousness prevail throughout the earth, nor until even distant lands beyond the seas have put their trust in him.” But it seems that the intent of the text is rather to bring out that the opposition the Messiah faces when carrying out His mission will not detract Him from reaching His goal. When Jesus faced, not only opposition, but misunderstanding, He turned to the Father and said: “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus will establish justice, *mishpat*, on earth. In the words of the Apostle Peter: “In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus laid the foundation for this when, having been crushed and dying on the cross, He cried: “It is finished!”<sup>3</sup>

We can testify to the truth that the islands have waited for His law. Working as missionaries among the Stone Age tribes of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, we discovered that they had a tradition about eternal life. They believed that it was taken away from mankind when sin entered the world but that would be given back to them at a future time. When the Gospel was preached to them and they understood it, they identified that message of salvation with their age-old tradition.

In the vv.5-9 Isaiah continues his prophecy about the Messiah. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: “Verses 5–9 comprise the ‘tailpiece’ to verses 1–4. One of the features of the key passages about the Servant – usually called ‘the Servant Songs’ (also in 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13 – 53:12) – is that each is followed by a ‘tailpiece’ (49:7–13; 50:10–11; 54:1 – 55:13) confirming whatever has just been said. This particular ‘tailpiece’ first (5) confirms the universal task of the Servant by dwelling on the Lord of all creation, secondly (6–7) pledges the Lord’s aid to his Servant (*cf.* 1), and thirdly (8–9) confirms the Servant’s success (*cf.* 4) by forecasting the overthrow of false gods and affirming the ability of the Lord of history to bring about the promised new situation.”

If the previous two chapters serve as an encouragement for those who would go into captivity, this chapter is meant to encourage God’s Servant, the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. It is difficult for us to understand the emotional and spiritual development Jesus must have gone through as a man born in this world. We tend to think of Him more as God than as a human being facing the same kind of challenges we all do in life. We may believe that Jesus had a secret drawer of divine power that He could open in times of need and pull out help that is beyond reach for all other members of the human race. When the Apostle Paul says about Jesus: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!”<sup>4</sup> we must understand that Jesus had no other means to survive in life on earth than we all do. In the incarnation He left His divine prerogatives behind and went through life, using the same means of grace that are available to us: the Word of God, faith, prayer and the Holy Spirit.

It is nigh to impossible for us to imagine what the relationship between the man Jesus Christ and His heavenly Father has been like while He was on earth. After all, before His incarnation, Jesus was “the Word.” He was and is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”<sup>5</sup> When the Father reminds Him here of the fact that He “created the heavens

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1. Matt. 11:25,26
  2. II Peter 3:13
  3. John 19:30
  4. Phil. 2:6-8

and stretched them out,” and “spread out the earth and all that comes out of it,” gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it,” could not Jesus have answered: “Wait a minute, it was I who did that?” But He did not. It wasn’t that the man Jesus could not remember His pre-incarnate glory. In His last prayer with His disciples He said: “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”<sup>1</sup> He lived on earth within the same limitation we face, although without a sinful nature. The fact that He needed the Father’s encouragement and received it should also be a great encouragement to us.

The Messiah is called “a covenant for the people.” The Hebrew word *beriyth* is derived from a word that means “cutting.” As a covenant was made between two parties, animals would be cut in pieces and both parties would pass between the pieces. We find this illustrated in Abraham’s life. We read: “So the LORD said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.’ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.”<sup>2</sup> In His covenant with Abraham, only God passed between the pieces. The Messiah is called “a covenant” because He was the One who was killed and cut in the crucifixion. According to the author of Hebrews, this covenant was called “an eternal covenant.” The main stipulation was that if the Son gave Himself as a sacrifice, the Father would raise Him from the dead. We read: “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”<sup>3</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says about the covenant: “The Servant is the covenant – not just that through him *people ... Gentiles* are brought into a covenant relationship with the Lord, but that in him covenant blessing are enjoyed. The ‘covenant’ is God’s free decision and promise to take and keep people for his own possession. It was Israel’s unique privilege – to be drawn to the Lord in deliverance and redemption (Ex. 6:2–7), to know and obey him as redeemer (Ex 20:1–3). It began on a universal scale with Noah (Gn. 6:17–18; 9:8–17); it became specific to Abraham (Gn. 15, 17), the man entrusted with the universal blessing; it reached its normative form in Moses (Ex. 2:24, 24:7–8); and now in the Servant, it extends once more to the whole world. Universality is not, therefore, a violation or adjustment of the covenant; it is its fulfillment.”

The result of the covenant will be that blind eyes will be opened and prisoners will be released. Isaiah mentioned this in earlier prophecies: “In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see.”<sup>4</sup> And “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.”<sup>5</sup> Later on in his book, he lets the Messiah say: “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus used that prophecy as the text for the sermon He preached in the synagogue in Nazareth.<sup>7</sup>

We see in the Gospels several instances in which Jesus healed physical blindness and deafness, but we do not read that He caused prisoners to be released physically. We may assume, therefore, that the main

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5. Heb. 1:3
  1. John 17:5
  2. Gen. 15:9-11,17
  3. Heb. 13:20,21
  4. Isa. 29:18
  5. Isa. 35:5
  6. Isa. 61:1
  7. See Luke 4:16-19.

thrust of this prophecy is spiritual. Jesus' remarks to the Pharisees, after the healing of the man who was born blind, confirm this. We read: "Jesus said, 'For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.' Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, 'What? Are we blind too?' Jesus said, 'If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.'"<sup>1</sup> The blindness and darkness referred to is the result of sin. The Apostle Paul writes: "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."<sup>2</sup>

When God came to deliver Israel from her slavery in Egypt, He said to Moses: "So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey — the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites."<sup>3</sup> And upon arrival at the foot of Mount Sinai, God said: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."<sup>4</sup> This transformation from slavery to freedom, from evil to goodness, from death to life could only be achieved in a living relationship with Yahweh, the God who conceived the plan and carried it out. Israel's tendency to turn to any other power that presented itself as supernatural would sabotage the fulfillment of the plan. This is the reason the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan, most of which was not done under complete divine supervision, brought Israel from the frying pan into the fire. If people are only happy when they are being fed, regardless of what happens to their children who are being murdered, they will remain slaves all their lives even if they are set free. The ones who have milk and honey in themselves are those that will enter the Promised Land and possess it. The others will enter the place and remain slaves. That is what idolatry does to a person.

V.8 suggests that this deliverance is comprised in the Name of the Lord. It is because God is Yahweh that the blind will see and the darkness of imprisonment will be dissipated. It is part of His glory. It is the victory of light over darkness, of faith over idolatry.

To the idols God says: "I will not give my glory to another." But God does share His glory with human beings. David testifies in one of his Psalms: "But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head."<sup>5</sup> And in another Psalm he answers his own question: "what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor."<sup>6</sup> In a Psalm by King Solomon the king includes all of creation saying: "Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen."<sup>7</sup> In His last prayer for His disciples on earth, Jesus says: "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world."<sup>8</sup> The glory of the Lord will ultimately be bestowed upon all who have surrendered their lives to God in Jesus Christ, who have become "the bride of the Lamb." John saw the magnificent picture of this in his last prophecy when an angel said to him: "'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."<sup>9</sup>

1. John 9:39-41
2. II Cor 4:4
3. Ex. 3:8
4. Ex. 20:2
5. Ps. 3:3
6. Ps. 8:4,5
7. Ps. 72:19
8. John 17:22, 24
9. Rev. 21:9-11

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on v.9: “In the sequence of Isaiah’s thought from 41:1 forwards, the *former things* are the events linked with the irresistible conqueror (41:1–4, 25–27) and the *new things* are the now-foretold work of the Servant (42:1–4). Isaiah envisages himself, for dramatic effect, as looking back on the one and forward to the other, so that the certain fulfillment of the one set of predictions gives assurance of the prospective fulfillment of the other.”

iii. Singing world, saving Lord (42:10–17)

**10 Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it, you islands, and all who live in them.**

**11 Let the desert and its towns raise their voices; let the settlements where Kedar lives rejoice. Let the people of Sela sing for joy; let them shout from the mountaintops.**

**12 Let them give glory to the LORD and proclaim his praise in the islands.**

**13 The LORD will march out like a mighty man, like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies.**

**14 "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant.**

**15 I will lay waste the mountains and hills and dry up all their vegetation; I will turn rivers into islands and dry up the pools.**

**16 I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.**

**17 But those who trust in idols, who say to images, 'You are our gods,' will be turned back in utter shame.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: “Rounding off this section on the hopelessness and hope of the Gentile world which began in 41:21, *the ends of the earth*, the *islands* (10), and the Gentile towns of *Kedar* and *Sela* (11), combine in praise to the Lord who marches against his enemies (12–13). The Lord himself then (14–17) elaborates this cause for praise. His age-long silence is broken (14), he plans a world transformation (15), the world’s needy are cared for (16) and idolaters exposed to their proper shame (17). This lovely song fits accurately into its context. The Servant brought hope to the islands (4) and *islands* now rejoice (10); the Lord guaranteed that the Servant would open blind eyes (7) and their *darkness* becomes *light* (16); he promised that his glory would no longer be given to idols (8) and the former devotees of the idols now give him praise (12). A world’s song to a saving Lord indeed!”

The expression “a new song” is borrowed from *The Book of Psalms*, where we find it six times.<sup>1</sup> In *The Book of Revelation* the new song is sung by the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders and the redeemed.<sup>2</sup> In Isaiah’s text all of creation joins in, including “the desert and its towns.” The song is a song of God’s victory over Satan.

*The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* states about the description of God as a war hero: “The description is anthropomorphically dazzling and bold, such as the self-assurance and vividness of the Israelitish idea of God permitted, without any danger of misunderstanding. Jehovah goes out into the conflict like a hero; and like a ‘man of war,’ i.e., like one who has already fought many battles, and is therefore ready for war, and well versed in warfare, He stirs up jealousy (see at Isa 9:6). His jealousy has slumbered as it were for a long time, as if smoldering under the ashes; but now He stirs it up, i.e., makes it burn up into a bright flame. Going forward to the attack, ... ‘He breaks out into a cry,’ ... ‘yea, a yelling cry’ ... In the words, ‘He will show Himself as a hero upon His enemies,’ we see Him already engaged in the

1. See Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1.

2. See Rev. 5:9; 14:3.

battle itself, in which He proves Himself to possess the strength and boldness of a hero ... The overthrow which heathenism here suffers at the hand of Jehovah is, according to our prophet's view, the final and decisive one. The redemption of Israel, which is thus about to appear, is redemption from the punishment of captivity, and at the same time from all the troubles that arise from sin. The period following the captivity and the New Testament times here flow into one." *The Commentary* continues about the image of the woman in labor: "To the figure of a hero there is now added that of a travailing woman; *paa`aah* is short breathing ... *naasham* the snorting of violent inspiration and expiration; *shaa`ap* the earnest longing for deliverance pressing upon the burden in the womb; and *yachad* expresses the combination of all these several strainings of the breath, which are associated with the so-called labor-pains. Some great thing, with which Jehovah has, as it were, long been pregnant, is now about to be born."

God's victory has been reflected in some human combats in which people realized that they were acting in the Name of the Lord. When David faced Goliath, he said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands."<sup>1</sup>

When King Jehoshaphat faced an attack by the Moabites and Ammonites we read that a prophet said to him: "Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God's. Tomorrow march down against them. They will be climbing up by the Pass of Ziz, and you will find them at the end of the gorge in the Desert of Jeruel. You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.'"<sup>2</sup>

Yet, when we look at the way God went about defeating His enemy we see a different picture. God Himself compares the battle to a woman giving birth to a child. Jesus uses the same image for His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion. "I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."<sup>3</sup> Although these words are addressed to the disciples, they describe well the way in which Jesus won the battle. The new birth was accomplished by means of an apparent defeat: the death of the hero. The mighty man in v.13 is the woman in labor in v.14 in order to prove that "the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."<sup>4</sup>

The "new birth," which is the fruit of God's labor pains, results in a complete makeover of nature. Although Isaiah's pictures are probably meant allegorically, the Scriptures teach us that there will be physical changes in our planet's condition. As Noah's flood was a natural disaster, so will the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, about which both Peter and John speak, be a physical phenomenon. Peter writes: "But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and

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1. I Sam. 17:45-47
  2. II Chron. 20:15-17
  3. John 16:20-23
  4. I Cor. 1:25

destruction of ungodly men.”<sup>1</sup> And John testifies in *Revelation*: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.”<sup>2</sup>

But the primary meaning is, most likely, meant to be spiritual. We find the same imagery in The Book of Psalms, where, after describing God’s intervention in the lives of those who cry to the Lord for help, we read: “He turned rivers into a desert, flowing springs into thirsty ground, and fruitful land into a salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who lived there. He turned the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs; there he brought the hungry to live, and they founded a city where they could settle. They sowed fields and planted vineyards that yielded a fruitful harvest; he blessed them, and their numbers greatly increased, and he did not let their herds diminish.”<sup>3</sup>

*The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* comments on these verses: “Jehovah’s panting in labor is His almighty fiery breath, which turns mountains and hills into heaps of ruins, scorches up the vegetation, condenses streams into islands, and dries up the lakes; that is to say, turns the strange land, in which Israel has been held captive, into a desert, and at the same time removes all the hindrances to His people’s return, thus changing the present condition of the world into one of the very opposite kind, which displays His righteousness in wrath and love.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, suggests that the end of the old order means: “The fertility (*vegetation*) and water (*rivers, pools*) that sustained life will disappear, but that does not mean the end of life, only a different way of life – a life dependent on the Lord’s care for those whom he leads out. He caters for everything: their personal incapacities of blindness and ignorance (16ab), circumstantial problems of darkness and rough terrain (16cd) – and all with the guarantee of his personal presence and action (*lead ... guide ... turn ... not forsake*).”

If we put our trust in God to overcome the opposition we face in life, if we act on the assumption that “the battle is not ours, but God’s,” if we realize that without Him we can do nothing,<sup>4</sup> we will enter God’s new creation and become part of it. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Those who believe that they can make it on their own, which is the essence of idolatry, “will be turned back in utter shame.”

## VII. THE LORD’S PLAN UNFOLDED (42:18 – 44:23)

### a. Israel’s bondage and liberation (42:18–42:21)

#### i. The blind servant (42:18–25)

**18** *"Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see!*

**19** *Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the LORD?*

**20** *You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing."*

**21** *It pleased the LORD for the sake of his righteousness to make his law great and glorious.*

**22** *But this is a people plundered and looted, all of them trapped in pits or hidden away in prisons. They have become plunder, with no one to rescue them; they have been made loot, with no one to say, "Send them back."*

**23** *Which of you will listen to this or pay close attention in time to come?*

**24** *Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned? For they would not follow his ways; they did not obey his law.*

1. II Peter 3:5-7
2. Rev. 21:1
3. Ps. 107:33-38
4. See John 15:5.
5. II Cor. 4:6

**25 So he poured out on them his burning anger, the violence of war. It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand; it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart.**

In introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, writes: “Isaiah has seen his people caught up in a double plight: captivity because of sin – and that the deadliest of all sins, the abandonment of the way of faith, the rejection of the Lord’s promises in favor of a do-it-yourself remedy (chs. 38 – 39). But the double plight was matched by a double cure, the word of comfort (40:1–2): both that the time of duress would end, and that iniquity would be pardoned. The section that now opens continues along this twin track – and it really is a twin track: the parallel development of two themes. Captivity will be ended by national liberation (42:18 – 43:21), and sin dealt with by spiritual redemption (43:22 – 44:21). Under the former heading, Isaiah moves through four topics: captivity (42:18–25), the meeting of this need (43:1–7), the Lord, Savior and sole God, in contrast with idols (43:8–13), and redemption from Babylon (43:14–21). He then offers four matching topics: sin (43:22–24), the meeting of this need (43:25 – 44:5), the Lord, Redeemer and only God in contrast with idols (44:6–20), and redemption from sin (44:21–23). It is important to grasp this overall plan. Isaiah wrote a book with planned development and everything in its proper place. As an example of this, note how, with the matching passages on idols (43:8–13; 44:6–20), each suits its own context: the former focuses on the inability of other ‘gods’ to act in history, the latter on their inability to save spiritually.”

The primary meaning of vv.18-20 is, undoubtedly, that Israel as a nation was deaf to the voice of the Lord and blind to His acts. God accuses Israel of being deaf and blind and He holds them responsible for their condition. The use of the term “servant” makes the accusation the more poignant. But although “servant” is used to designate the nation of Israel, there is a sense in which it is applied to the Messiah also. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “By some critics the earlier verses of this passage (vers. 19-21) are regarded as having reference to the ‘Servant of the Lord’ depicted in vers. 1-7, and as calling on the captive Jews to consider his voluntary humiliation, and the object of it. But this view seems to be strained. It requires ‘deaf’ and ‘blind’ to be taken in completely different senses in the two consecutive verses, 18 and 19.” *The Commentary* is correct in that it would be wrong to interpret these verses as referring exclusively to the Messiah. V.20: “You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing” argues against this. God had called Israel to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>1</sup> That was the reason for their election and salvation. Israel as a whole had never understood this, nor considered themselves to be a nation of priests, standing between God and the world. They had come to believe that God was interested in them because they were so special. They did not understand that they were special because God was interested in them.

In the letters to the churches of Asia Minor, the Lord says seven times: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”<sup>2</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: The ‘deaf’ are not absolutely without hearing, nor the ‘blind’ absolutely without sight. They can ‘hear’ and ‘see,’ if they choose to do so. When they do not see, it is because they ‘wink with their eyes’ (... Matthew 13:15); when they do not hear, it is because, like the deaf adder, they ‘stop their ears’ (...Psalm 58:4). This, at any rate, is the case with the majority. There may be some who have deadened their moral vision altogether, and have no longer any ‘ears to hear.’ God, however, addresses the mass of Israel as still possessed of moral discernment, if they will but use it, and calls upon them to wake up out of sleep — to ‘hear’ and ‘see.’ ”

V.21 seems to indicate that what happened to Israel in their disgrace and captivity was incongruent with the glory of the law that God had entrusted to them. When God created man in His image and likeness He intended him to reflect His glory. It was sin that made us all fall short of the glory of God.<sup>3</sup> Israel, as warden of God’s great and glorious law, ought to have been a great and glorious nation, but it was not.

1. Ex. 19:6
2. Rev. 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22
3. Rom. 3:23

Yet, there is a sense in which “Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the LORD?” applies to the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. He took upon Himself our deafness and blindness, as Isaiah says in a later chapter: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.”<sup>1</sup> The healing of Israel and of us is brought about by the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection opens our ears and puts ointment on our eyes. Jesus’ deafness and blindness, of course, does not infer a spirit of disobedience, as it does for Israel. It is not a punishment for His own disobedience, but for the disobedience of others.

Bible scholars have struggled with the fact that Isaiah does not obey the rules of Hebrew poetry in v.19. Hebrew parallelism would require the verse to read: “Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, *deaf* like the servant of the LORD?” Instead it reads: “Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the LORD?” Some call this “extremely ugly.” The ugliness is evidently intended.

The last part of this section, vv.23-25, looks into the question of Israel’s rejection. It is a search for the meaning of all that happens. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: “Recognizing that he has an unpalatable truth to share (*Which of you will listen?*), Isaiah takes us to the theological heart of Israel’s situation. First, the key question to ask is not ‘Why?’ but ‘Who?’ ‘Why?’ is the cry of logic looking for a way to make life’s tragedies fit into a humanly satisfying pattern. To this there is no answer (55:8). ‘Who?’ brings us to rest on the executive sovereignty of the Lord. *Was it not the LORD?* Secondly, for the people of God the word of God is the clue to life: the tragedy came about through sin. *They would not follow ... did not obey; i.e.* specifically the sin of having revealed truth but not conforming to it. *Would not follow:* (lit) ‘were not willing to walk in,’ *Obey:* ‘listen to,’ the submission of the mind to the world of God. Thirdly, there is the reality of divine chastisement: his personal *burning anger*. On *anger*, cf. 5:25. *Violence of war:* the Lord of history uses the forces of history to punish his disobedient people. Fourthly, disobedience brings suffering and loss, *flames ... consumed*. But, fifthly, not even suffering on the scale of defeat, bondage and deprivation (22) produced reformation: as Isaiah viewed his people he saw in them spiritual incomprehension, they *did not understand ... take it to heart*. The Lord’s people though they are, possessing his truth though they do, they are still direly in need of an inner work of transformation, first touching the mind (*understand*, lit. ‘know’), and then the *heart*, the inner spring of responsiveness and direction (Pr. 4:23).”

For the sake of clarity we copy the embedded references: Isa. 55:8 – “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the LORD.” Isa. 5:25 – “Therefore the LORD’s anger burns against his people; his hand is raised and he strikes them down. The mountains shake, and the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.” Prov. 4:23 – “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.”

Motyer’s stand is well taken. God never, or rarely, answers our question “Why?” “Who” finds a clear answer in these verses. Howard Dunn, in his book *When Heaven is Silent*, states that the only question God answers in times of incomprehensible tragedy is “What?” in the sense of “What do you, Lord, want me to do with this?” But the Israel in Isaiah’s day, or even during the Babylonian captivity, was not close enough to God to ask that question. Israel’s situation was much like that of an alcoholic who wakes up with the hangover the morning after. The question “why?” is redundant.

ii. Unchanged divine care (43:1-7)

***I But now, this is what the LORD says — he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.***

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1. Isa. 53:4

**2** *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.*

**3** *For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead.*

**4** *Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life.*

**5** *Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west.*

**6** *I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth —*

**7** *everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."*

This section contains another one of Isaiah's wonderful surprises. One would assume that, after the severe rebuke of the previous verses and the pouring out of God's anger over His people, God would leave Israel to stew in her own juice. Hosea, similarly, gives expression to God's pent-up emotions: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man — the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath."<sup>1</sup> It is because God is God and not man, because all His acts are governed by His love, that "wrath" cannot be the final word.

V.1 reveals God's motivation for changing His attitude. Israel was His own creation. This speaks obviously of more than of God's creation of the human race. The reference here is to Israel's place in God's plan of salvation for the whole world. As at the foot of Mount Sinai, God says here: "I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself ... Out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."<sup>2</sup> "I have summoned you by name" reads literally in Hebrew "I have called you by your name." *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes profoundly: "When God calls Jacob Israel, he calls him by the name of God." The Apostle John says in Revelation about the servants of God: "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."<sup>3</sup> If God would throw away Israel, He would throw away part of Himself.

The assurance of God's presence in v.2 casts a glance into the past and into the future. Israel passed twice through waters: the water of the Red Sea<sup>4</sup> and the River Jordan.<sup>5</sup> Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego experienced literally that God was with them in the fire.<sup>6</sup> God would be with them like He was with Noah's ark during the flood. This gives us the promise that He will also be with His children when "the heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."<sup>7</sup> God does not guarantee that we will be saved water and fire experiences, but He promises that He will see us through.

V.3 seems difficult to interpret in a satisfactory manner. One of the problems is the verb tense of "give" in vv.3 and 4, "I give" or "I have given" and "I will give." *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes that it clearly shows that it only "states a fact which as yet is only completed so far as the purpose

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1. Hos. 11:8,9
  2. Ex. 19:4-6
  3. Rev. 22:4
  4. Ex.14
  5. Josh.3
  6. Dan.3
  7. II Peter 3:10

is concerned.” *Barnes’ Notes* states here: “The true interpretation ... is that Egypt was regarded as having been given up to desolation and destruction instead of the Israelites. One of them must perish; and God chose that Egypt, though so much more mighty and powerful, should be reduced to desolation in order to deliver his people. They took their place, and were destroyed instead of the Hebrews, in order that they might be delivered from the bondage under which they groaned. This may be used as a striking illustration of the atonement made for sin, when the Lord Jesus, the expiatory offering, was made to suffer in the stead ... of his people, and in order that sinners might live. And if God’s giving up the Egyptians to destruction-themselves so guilty and deserving of death-in order to save his people, was a proof of his love for them, how much greater is the demonstration of his love when he gives his own holy Son to the bitter pains of death on a cross, in order that his church may be redeemed!” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, explains: “NIV follows many in the translation *I will give*, and, of course, the Hebrew perfect tense can well express a confidence for the future (‘I have determined to give’), but this is understandable only if we take it to mean ‘I have determined to give (if I have to),’ for Egypt has no part to play in the Lord’s future care of his people. Furthermore, to translate the perfect here as a future destroys the contrast with *I will give* at the end of the verse. Rather, the titles of the Lord in verse 3ab flow naturally into a reference to the exodus: because he is Yahweh, Israel’s God and Holy One, their Savior, he actually did give Egypt as their ransom. Faced with Egyptian intransigent refusal to let the people go, the Lord, so to speak, weighed up whether he was prepared to shatter Egypt in order to free Israel. There was ‘no contest,’ and it was ‘at the expense of’ ... Egypt that Israel was freed. *Cush* and *Seba* are respectively the extreme south of Egypt and lands still further south.”

The Hebrew word, translated “ransom” is *kopher* which literally means: “a cover.” We find it for the first time in the verses in which God instructs Noah to build an ark: “So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and *coat it* with pitch inside and out.”<sup>1</sup> In Job it is used as “ransom,” as in: “Spare him from going down to the pit; I have found *a ransom* for him.”<sup>2</sup> The general use refers to what God did with the sins of those who confessed their sins to Him in the Old Testament. The shedding of the blood of a sacrificial animal would provide a temporary cover until the time when the shedding of Jesus’ blood would wash away sin. V.4 states “I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life.” And, as *Barnes’ Notes* observes, the ultimate exchange was made when Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world.

The first interpretation of vv.5-7 pertains, undoubtedly, to Judah’s return from captivity. But there is a much wider application than this historic fact. The prophecy pertains ultimately to “everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” Since Israel and Judah were led into captivity by nations northeast of Canaan, calling them back from the four directions of the wind, would make little sense. The founding of the modern state of Israel would partially fit the picture. But since God’s call extends to everyone called by His Name, the foremost and final fulfillment pertains to the church, the *ecclesia*, the ones who are called out. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: “The wide reference to ‘humankind’ in verse 4 is now justified. The Lord foresees a worldwide scattering and a worldwide regathering. From all the compass points (5–6), embracing *everyone* of his people (7). *My sons ... daughters*: right up to the End of the Next-of-Kin relationship (1; Ex. 2:21) remains unchanged, and the initial thoughts of *created* and *formed* are enhanced by the added thought that, in so doing, the Lord purposed his own *glory*. Thus his honor is bound up with the final security of those whom he chose to be his people.”

iii. No other God: sure promises (43:8–13)

**8 Lead out those who have eyes but are blind, who have ears but are deaf.**

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1. Gen. 6:14

2. Job 33:24

**9 All the nations gather together and the peoples assemble. Which of them foretold this and proclaimed to us the former things? Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right, so that others may hear and say, "It is true."**

**10 "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.**

**11 I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior.**

**12 I have revealed and saved and proclaimed — I, and not some foreign god among you. You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "that I am God.**

**13 Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?"**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states by way of introduction: "Whether we think of Isaiah's people as in Palestine or taken into exile or residents in Babylon, they are surrounded by other gods and their devotees. Therefore they need to get their theology straight: what sort of entities are these who seem so powerful and whom others worship with such conviction? This short passage, therefore, has an abiding relevance."

These verses are, first of all, addressed to the people of Israel, who were called deaf and blind in previous sections. Their deafness is not physical but spiritual. They can hear the sounds of this world but not the voice of God. In everyday life we must fine-tune our ears to hear God's voice. God rarely comes to us in a booming voice. Elijah heard God speak in "a gentle whisper." We read: "Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave."<sup>1</sup> But this is not the only way in which God speaks. Jesus says: "I tell you the truth [Amen, amen], a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live."<sup>2</sup> We can hardly imagine people more deaf than dead people. Even those who do not want to hear God's voice will eventually hear Him speak.

But in those who are deaf, the ones that cause their deafness are addressed also. The Psalmist describes idols, saying: "Their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats." And he adds: "Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them."<sup>3</sup> We will all bear the image of the God or gods we serve. Behind every closed ear stands a deaf-dumb idol and behind every idol statue stands an evil power. So in speaking to the deaf and blind in these verses, God addresses Satan at the same time.

God links the fulfillment of prophecy to His own character. God's acts all reflect His personality, His glory, His eternity. Everything God does reflects who He is. This causes some problems for most people in daily life. It is easy to accept that God is good and loving when what happens to us is pleasant. But how can we recognize God in our suffering? David sings: "All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant."<sup>4</sup> It takes intimacy with God to recognize His loving and faithful ways in hardship. When we place our experiences and all that happens in this world against the background of the war that is going on between light and darkness, we will see that light breaking through.

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1. I Kings 19:11-13
  2. John 5:25
  3. See Ps. 115:4-8.
  4. Ps. 25:10

Here God uses prophecy, particularly Isaiah's prophecy to prove His character. This makes Isaiah, as witness of God's glory, an image of the coming Messiah, the servant God has chosen, our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me" expresses in terms of time what pertains to eternity. In eternity there is no "before" or "after." What makes eternity so incomprehensible to us is that it is one eternal present. What God says in these words is that no one is eternal besides Himself. This proclamation is made in reference to two acts: saving and judgment. This is expressed in the words "apart from me there is no savior" and "No one can deliver out of my hand." Actually, the Hebrew word *natsal*, rendered "deliver," literally means: "to snatch away." Depending on the context this can be in a good or a bad sense. We find it used in the verse: "So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey — the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites."<sup>1</sup> Jesus expressed the same thought when He said: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; *no one can snatch them out of my hand*. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; *no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand*. I and the Father are one."<sup>2</sup>

iv. A new exodus: the problem of bondage solved (43:14–21)

**14 This is what the LORD says — your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "For your sake I will send to Babylon and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians, in the ships in which they took pride.**

**15 I am the LORD, your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King."**

**16 This is what the LORD says — he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, 17 who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:**

**18 "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.**

**19 See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.**

**20 The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen,**

**21 the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states about this section: "This passage concludes the section which began at 42:18: the problem of national enslavement and the Lord's promise to solve it. The sequence is coherent; the problem (42:18–25), the Lord's unchanged care of his people (43:1–7), his sovereign ability to save (43:8–13) and, finally the deliverance he will effect. The exodus which has been alluded to throughout (43:3, 9, 11) now dominates the imagery (16–17, 19–20): what the Lord has done is the model for his coming acts."

Bible scholars have been puzzled about the mention of Babylonian ships. First of all, the Hebrew text uses *Kasdiy*, which is taken to refer to "Chaldeans." Jeremiah speaks of the Babylonian waterways, which presupposes the use of ships. We read: "You who live by many waters and are rich in treasures, your end has come, the time for you to be cut off."<sup>3</sup> And *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* states: "We know from other sources that the Chaldeans not only navigated the Euphrates, but the Persian Gulf as well, and employed vessels built by Phoenicians for warlike purposes also."

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: "It is easy to think of the city delighting in its sea-borne trade and now to envisage the same shipping laden with refugees. This did not happen when Babylon fell ...

1. Ex. 3:8

2. John 10:27-30

3. Jer. 51:13

Once more ... Isaiah is not describing but using stereotypical images of the fall of a city. A prophet present at the event would not have spoken thus.”

The strong emphasis on God’s holiness in these verses “the Holy One of Israel” and “I am the LORD, your Holy One,” as well as the renewed reference to Israel’s creation, serve to underline the fact that God links His acts of salvation to His character. Israel was God’s creation as instrument of His revelation in this world. And it is the revelation of His holiness that is the issue. That is what salvation and judgment is all about.

In vv.16-21 the upcoming deliverance from captivity is compared to Israel’s exodus from Egypt. The promise is given that the latter will overshadow the former. A look at history does not confirm this. The crossing of the Red Sea with the subsequent drowning of Pharaoh’s army and the crossing of the Jordan River, marking the beginning of the conquest of Canaan, were events marked by supernatural intervention. All we see in the return from captivity is a bunch of poor refugees slouching back to their homeland in ruin. But looks are deceiving. It took, so to speak, more supernatural intervention to precondition Cyrus’ heart in preparation for the return from captivity than it took to harden Pharaoh’s heart during the exodus. The difference is that the latter was visible on a physical level, the former was invisible in the spiritual realm. In this, the event foreshadows the cross of Christ, which, from a natural point of view “is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”<sup>1</sup> That is why God says: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!” The desert crossing that is mapped out from Babylon to Canaan is more important than the one Israel made from Egypt to the Promised Land.

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* quotes Jerome, who wrote on v.19: “I will open a way not merely in the Red Sea, but in the wilderness of the whole world; and not merely one river shall gush out of the rock, but many, which shall refresh, not the bodies as formerly, but the souls of the thirsty, so that the prophecy shall be fulfilled: ‘With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.’ ”

Interestingly, God interjects “Do you not perceive it?” This is the translation of the Hebrew word *yada`* “to know” in the sense of “to ascertain by seeing.” The first time this word occurs in Scripture it was Satan who used it. “For God *knows* that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, *knowing* good and evil.”<sup>2</sup> The people in Isaiah’s day could, of course, not perceive what would happen a century later, but their knowledge of similar events ought to trigger some kind of recognition. They had not personally experienced the exodus from Egypt either, but they experienced the fruit of it by living in the Promised Land. Their reaction to Isaiah’s prophecy ought to be: “Of course! This is the way God acts!”

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “As he led his people out of their Egyptian bondage, first through the Red Sea, and then through a ‘howling wilderness’ (...Deuteronomy 32:10), so now he will ‘make a way’ for them through a still more desolate tract. We are nowhere historically told by what route the Israelites ultimately returned. If they went by Tadmor and Damascus, they must have traversed a most arid and difficult desert. Even if they did not quit the Euphrates till they reached the latitude of Aleppo, still they must have had some wide tracts of wilderness to cross.”

God says to Israel: “The wild animals honor Me, why don’t you?” These words are similar to what Jesus answered the Pharisees when the children cried Hosanna in the temple: “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”<sup>3</sup>

This section should be understood on two different levels. There is the physical plane on which we see a literal desert turning into arable ground and there is the spiritual level where God provides the Holy Spirit for a thirsty soul. The jackals and owls honor God for the former; human beings ought to praise Him for the latter.

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1. I Cor 1:18
  2. Gen. 3:5
  3. Luke 19:40

## b. Israel's sin and redemption (43:22–44:23)

## i. Diagnosis (43:22–24)

**22 "Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel.  
 23 You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense.  
 24 You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses.**

After observing that Israel never really ceased to bring sacrifices to God before or after the captivity, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "The emphasis of the present verses, therefore, must lie beneath rather than on the surface. First, then, the emphasis in the Hebrew of verse 22a requires 'Not upon me did you call ...', an accusation matching 1:10ff., not that ritual and prayer had ceased but that they failed to reach the God to whom they were supposedly addressed. This emphasis appears only in the wording of 22a, but if we allow it to set the pattern through, the passage makes sense. Their religion was a failure. Secondly, there is the verb *burdened* (23c, 24c), literally 'I did not make slaves of you with grain offerings ... you made a slave of me with your sins.' By the exodus the Lord brought his people out of slavery (Ex. 6:6) and gave them his law, both moral and cultic, as a sign that they were no longer slaves (Ex. 20:2, 3ff.) but could walk at liberty (Ps. 119:45). As we saw in 1:10–15, however, they had brought themselves into a new bondage, a religion of incessant observance. But ritual for its own sake, observance divorced from moral and spiritual commitment, neither satisfies God (1:11, 13) nor brings blessing to people (1:15). Indeed, to the contrary, for they had made ritual a technique for manipulating blessing, putting the Lord at their beck and call. Thus, enslaving themselves all over again, they sought also to make him their slave! Thirdly, the verb *wearied* runs through these verses (22b, 23d, 24d). Verse 22b is (lit.) 'you have wearied of me.' In verses 23–24 the causative active means, 'I did not make you weary ... you made me weary.' The sacrificial system was meant by the Lord to be part of the joy of possessing his law: through the sacrifices atonement was made, sins were forgiven and fellowship with God was enjoyed (Lv. 1:14; 4:31; Dt. 16:10–11). But when the sacrifices were allowed to become an end in themselves, the people remained in their sin and became a weariness upon the Holy One. Seen along these lines, verses 22–24 join the other passage of pre-exilic rebuke at misuse of the sacrificial system. There was much religious fervor, no religious reality; where they assumed they were pleasing God, they were trying his patience; where they were most confident they were right with God, they were proving only that they were still in their sin. In this searching way Isaiah establishes Israel's sin and need for divine forgiveness."

What God reproaches Israel of here, Jesus said to some of the New Testament churches. To the church in Ephesus He made the Apostle John write: "You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."<sup>1</sup> And in a letter to the church in Sardis, we read: "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you."<sup>2</sup> If what we do for God is not done out of a sense of love and gratitude it becomes like dead wood. The only sacrifice of value to God is the sacrifice of ourselves.

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1. Rev. 2:3-5

2. Rev. 3:1-3

David captured the sense of this truth when he wrote in one of his Psalms: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’”<sup>1</sup> The writer of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* applies this to our Lord Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross, saying: “Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am — it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, O God.’ First he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them’ (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, ‘Here I am, I have come to do your will.’ He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”<sup>2</sup>

Our reasonable response to Jesus’ sacrifice that makes us holy is “to offer [our] bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is [our] spiritual act of worship.”<sup>3</sup> Anything less would constitute burdening God with our sins and wearying Him with our offenses.

ii. Remedy (43:25–44:5)

**25** *"I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.*

**26** *Review the past for me, let us argue the matter together; state the case for your innocence.*

**27** *Your first father sinned; your spokesmen rebelled against me.*

**28** *So I will disgrace the dignitaries of your temple, and I will consign Jacob to destruction and Israel to scorn.*

**44:1** - *"But now listen, O Jacob, my servant, Israel, whom I have chosen.*

**2** *This is what the LORD says — he who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant, Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.*

**3** *For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants.*

**4** *They will spring up like grass in a meadow, like poplar trees by flowing streams.*

**5** *One will say, ‘I belong to the LORD’; another will call himself by the name of Jacob; still another will write on his hand, ‘The LORD’s,’ and will take the name Israel.*

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, beautifully defines “grace” as it is expounded in these verses. We read: “Note that there is no connecting word between this verse and 22–24. There is no logic whereby we might connect sin with forgiveness, nor does the Lord explain himself. The logic whereby the offended God is the forgiving God is hidden in his heart. The emphasis *I, even I* catches at this truth – as though to say, ‘You would not know what to do about this (22–24), you have no remedy – but I am myself all you need.’”

In these verses God takes Israel to court and judges her case. The scene reminds us of the opening words of *The Book of Isaiah*: “ ‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.’ For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ps. 40:6-8

2. Heb. 10:5-10

3. Rom. 12:1

4. Isa. 1:18-20

Not only Israel, but humanity as a whole, stands before the judgment seat of God and is proved guilty. Our problem is stated in v.27 – “Your first father sinned; your spokesmen rebelled against me.”

*Barnes' Notes* gives a detailed list of interpretations as to who could be “your first father,” mentioned here, ranging from Adam, Abraham, the rulers and princes, the high priest Uriah to all the high priests collectively. *The Commentary* leans toward Abraham, although it makes no clear commitment. *The Commentary's* objection to Adam being the subject is that “he was not peculiarly the father of the Jews.” *The Pulpit Commentary* interprets “your first father” as being Abraham. But that does not help to clarify the picture.

It seems to me that logic requires Adam to be the first choice. Our guilt goes back to the act that brought sin into this world. When Adam sinned, he brought death upon himself and his offspring. The fact that we die proves that we are guilty.

The Hebrew word rendered “spokesmen” is *luwts*, which has the primary meaning of “to scoff.” But from that meaning evolved the idea of trying to pronounce a foreign language, and from there, “to interpret,” or “to intercede.” The first time the word is used in the Old Testament is in the story of Joseph and his brothers. We read: “They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an *interpreter*.”<sup>1</sup> Elihu uses the word in his speech to Job. He says: “His soul draws near to the pit, and his life to the messengers of death. Yet if there is an *angel* on his side as a mediator, one out of a thousand, to tell a man what is right for him, to be gracious to him and say, ‘Spare him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom for him’— then his flesh is renewed like a child’s; it is restored as in the days of his youth.”<sup>2</sup>

In v.27 *luwts* is probably used in the sense that Adam acted as the representative of the whole human race. It is like when the government of a country declares war on another country; it involves every member under its jurisdiction. A secondary meaning is probably, that those in charge of the temple service have made a mockery of the rituals and thus bring upon the nation destruction and captivity.

In vv.1-5 of chapter 44, God paints a picture with wide horizons, beginning with the birth of Jacob and going to the birth of the New Testament church. Following the announcement of the destruction of the temple comes a message of comfort and restoration. This prefigures in a way the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. For people who would live through the time when King Nebuchadnezzar captured the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, the message must have been too deep to fathom. The main comfort of this prophecy is for us who understand that the time “has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”<sup>3</sup>

In tracing Israel’s call to priesthood, God goes back to before the birth of Jacob, to the time when he and his brother were formed in their mother’s womb. That is when the first choice became effective. When Isaac married Rebekah she appeared to be barren. It was not until they had been married for twenty years that we read: “Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, ‘Why is this happening to me?’ So she went to inquire of the LORD. The LORD said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.’”<sup>4</sup> Evidently, what the twins did in their mother’s womb was more than the normal kicking of babies; there was a war going on between the one God had chosen and the one who would be rejected. The struggle between light and darkness, between God and Satan

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1. Gen. 42:23
  2. Job 33:22-25
  3. John 4:23,24
  4. Gen. 25:21-23

was being fought inside this woman's body. It would take too much space here to trace Jacob's way of dealing with God's election, which he thought to help by cheating his way through life. God called Jacob, the cheater, "My servant." But it took Jacob's transformation into Israel's for God to call him "chosen." "Jeshurun" means "upright." *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary* states: "The epithet righteous nation, as we may render Jeshurun, was intended to remind Israel of its calling and involved the severest reproof of its apostasy." J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states about Jeshurun: "The ending '-un' is a diminutive of affection. The name may be related to *yasar*, 'upright.' This is what the Lord wished his people to be. Used here, it emphasizes that, though they have failed to match his ideal, this is still his will for them."

We must remind ourselves that God's election of Israel was not primarily for salvation. Salvation was, in a sense, a byproduct of their election as a kingdom of priests. Israel was chosen to be the guardian of God's revelation in this world. As such she faced all the opposition of the kingdom of darkness. Israel's history is one extended desert journey that reaches well beyond the forty years it took to trek from Egypt to the Promised Land. Even in Isaiah's day and beyond they lived in a thirsty land and on dry ground that awaited the outpouring of God's Spirit. This outpouring ultimately came on the day of Pentecost. Through the coming of the Holy Spirit people who did not physically belong to Israel would say, "I belong to the LORD; another will call himself by the name of Jacob; still another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's.'" They would "take the name Israel."

The sons of Korah put this truth beautifully to music in the Psalm that reads: "He has set his foundation on the holy mountain; the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are said of you, O city of God: 'I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me — Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush — and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.' Indeed, of Zion it will be said, 'This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.' The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: 'This one was born in Zion.' As they make music they will sing, 'All my fountains are in you.'"<sup>1</sup> We all owe our salvation to Israel. She is the source of it all. If only she knew!

iii. No other God: sure promises (44: 6–20)

**6 "This is what the LORD says — Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.**

**7 Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come — yes, let him foretell what will come.**

**8 Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one."**

**9 All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame.**

**10 Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing?**

**11 He and his kind will be put to shame; craftsmen are nothing but men. Let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and infamy.**

**12 The blacksmith takes a tool and works with it in the coals; he shapes an idol with hammers, he forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength; he drinks no water and grows faint.**

**13 The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine.**

**14 He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow.**

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1. Ps. 87

**15 It is man's fuel for burning; some of it he takes and warms himself, he kindles a fire and bakes bread. But he also fashions a god and worships it; he makes an idol and bows down to it.**

**16 Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm; I see the fire."**

**17 From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me; you are my god."**

**18 They know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand.**

**19 No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?"**

**20 He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"**

In introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "The purpose of this section is announced in verses 6–8: since there is only one God, nothing can stand in the way of his purposes. This truth is then underlined by an exposure of the whole idea of other or alternative 'gods' (9–20). In 40:18–20 and 41:5–7, idol gods were exposed by contrast with the glory of the God of Israel; in 43:8–13 and present passage the argument is reversed: the glory of the God of Israel is seen by contrast with the absurdity and uselessness of the idols. The present passage has its own central focus. It is not just the nonsense that, had things turned out differently, what the idolater worships would have been used to cook his lunch (15–17), but that what he worships has no power of spiritual transformation, only the reverse (18–20) – unlike the true God (43:25; 44:3–5)! Isaiah has not forgotten the test of prediction and fulfillment (7), but he adds another: what consequences follow from worship? Transformation (44:3–5) or degeneration (18–20)?"

God calls Himself "the first and the last": *ri'shown* and *`ach<sup>a</sup>rown*. The Apostle John picks up on this title in *Revelation*, applying it to the Father, as in " 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty,'"<sup>1</sup> and to the Son, as in "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."<sup>2</sup> Isaiah, however, does not use the first and last letter of the Hebrew alphabet for this designation.

God also uses the titles "Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty." The Hebrew word used here for "redeemer" is *ga'al*, which refers to the next of kin who is supposed to buy back a relative's property. We find it in the verse: "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells some of his property, *his nearest relative* is to come and redeem what his countryman has sold."<sup>3</sup> "Lord Almighty" is the rendering of the Hebrew *Yahweh tsabaa'owt*, "the Lord of hosts," the commander in chief.

The announcement of these supreme titles excludes any rivalry. This does not only render any claim to idol worship ridiculous, but also Lucifer's claim, the "morning star, son of the dawn," who said in his heart: "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."<sup>4</sup> He is ultimately the object of ridicule in vv.9-20.

The past, present and future are summed up in the character of God. He is "the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." In this, God projects His own eternity upon the events in time: in the past, the present and the future.

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1. Rev. 1:8
  2. Rev. 22:13
  3. Lev. 25:25
  4. Isa. 14:13,14

God calls Himself “a rock,” *tsuwr* in Hebrew. Moses used the word to describe what God was for Israel: “He is the *Rock*, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.”<sup>1</sup> We find it in the verse: “I will stand there before you by *the rock* at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.”<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Paul spiritualizes this in: “They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

It is in the context of God’s knowledge of the future that He says to Israel: “Do not tremble, do not be afraid.” We cannot know the future, but we can know the One who holds the future in His hand. He is the solid rock upon whom we can build our future.

Isaiah reserves his most biting sarcasm for vv.9-20. Jeremiah exhibits some of Isaiah’s derision, though less detailed.<sup>4</sup> Before cutting down the idols, God directs His ire to those who make them, calling them “nothing.” The Hebrew text reads literally: “They that make a graven image, all of them [are] vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit.” The Hebrew word for “vanity” is *tohuw*, which is used to describe a desert. The same word is used in the verse: “Now the earth was *formless* and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”<sup>5</sup> The suggestion is that the image and likeness of God, in which man was created, is lost in those who make and worship idols.

The Hebrew word *buwsh*, “shame” occurs three times in these verses; twice it is rendered “shame” and once “infamy.”<sup>6</sup> It is the same word used in: “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no *shame*.”<sup>7</sup> Those who make and trust idols will find themselves spiritually naked. In the case of Adam and Eve, when their eyes were opened and they learned experientially the difference between good and evil, they condemned themselves. God did not have to tell them they were naked, they told Him. We read: “[Adam] answered [God], ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’ And [God] said, ‘Who told you that you were naked?’”<sup>8</sup> When the idol worshiper sees God he will condemn himself to his own shame.

The underlying thought in vv.9-11 is that the person who makes idols could have known better. The Apostle Paul uses this argument in Romans: “What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”<sup>9</sup>

Vv.12-17 describe the actual process of idol making. Isaiah first takes us to the blacksmith, who makes a statue out of metal. The Hebrew text seems to stress the fact that the smith needs tools to do the job. It reads literally: “The smith with tongs both work in the coals, and with hammers, fashions it and works it. We note the difference between the way God and man create. As the Psalmist sings: “Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.”<sup>10</sup> No one speaks an idol into being. Even with the help of his chisel and hammer, it takes the

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1. Deut. 32:4
  2. Ex. 17:6
  3. I Cor. 10:3,4
  4. See Jer. 10:3-5,8,9,11,14,15.
  5. Gen. 1:2
  6. See v.11.
  7. Gen. 2:25
  8. Gen. 3:10,11
  9. Rom. 1:19,20
  10. Ps. 33:8,9

blacksmith so much energy that he gets hungry and thirsty and feels faint. There is no comparison with the effortless way God called creation into being.

The carpenter, who works with material that is softer and easier to handle, needs even more tools to produce his product. The comparison with the way God created is closer here. God made man in His image and likeness. The carpenter makes the wooden statue in the likeness of a human being, but he is unable to breathe the breath of life into its nostrils and bring it to life.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact the carpenter has to borrow one of God's trees to be able to make his god. Here the case becomes more ridiculous, because the creator of idols does not use the whole tree for his purpose. Part of the wood is used for cooking, part for heating and what is left over goes into an idol! Isaiah paints the picture in great detail to emphasize how absurd it is.

In vv.16 and 17 Isaiah makes an appeal to his audience. He wants us to be the judge about the logic of the idolater's behavior. As J. Alec Motyer observes in *Isaiah*: "The idolater's 'logic' suggests that what has given him the physical benefit of cooked food (*roasts*, 16) and the comfort of bodily warmth (*fire*) can also nourish his soul: 'Save me, you are my God' (17)." The question is: Save from what? An objective look at the idolater's condition makes us understand that this man does not understand his own problem although that is clear to everyone else. The idolater says to the idol "Get me out of my trouble" but he does not realize that if the power that dominates idolatry answers his prayer, he will be worse off.

Idolatry ultimately allows man to keep control. If we worship the god we make ourselves, we in reality worship ourselves. At least that seems to be the situation. In reality, however, any road that does not lead to heaven leads to hell. The choice is not between God, Satan and self. There is only one alternative to worshipping God. What the idolater needs is salvation from idolatry, but that is not what he asks for.

*The New International Version* reads v.18: "Their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand." The Hebrew text actually puts this in the active mode: "He has shut their eyes that they cannot see, [and] that their hearts cannot understand," making God the agent. But, as in the case of Pharaoh's heart during the exodus, we read six times that Pharaoh hardened his own heart,<sup>2</sup> before we read: "But the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart."<sup>3</sup> God only plasters the eyes that man has already plastered. Interestingly, Jesus plastered the eyes of the man born blind for the purpose of healing. We read: "[Jesus] spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. 'Go,' he told him, 'wash in the Pool of Siloam' (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing."<sup>4</sup>

V.19 and 20 are the final reality check. The appeal is not only to the jury but to the offender also. As *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "It is implied that the idolaters had once had it in their power to think and reason justly upon the absurdity of such conduct as that which was now habitual to them. But they had lost the power. They had suffered themselves little by little to be deluded." Isaiah calls out: "Look what you are doing and ask yourself why you are doing it." That is the question Jesus put to Saul of Tarsus and it turned his life around: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"<sup>5</sup>

A waking up to reality would have shown the idolater that the idol he worships is the same material as the fuel he uses for his cooking. His temple turns out to be his kitchen. Before we read that the man used the wood for cooking some real food: bread and roast beef. Now things are turned around. Since the kitchen is converted into a temple, the food turns to ashes! That happens when our lives are built upon a lie; even the enjoyable things of life fade away.

iv. Redemption from sin (44:21–23)

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1. See Gen. 2:7.
  2. See Ex. 7:13, 22; 8:15, 22, 22; 9:7.
  3. Ex. 9:12
  4. John 9:6,7
  5. Acts 9:4

**21 "Remember these things, O Jacob, for you are my servant, O Israel. I have made you, you are my servant; O Israel, I will not forget you.**

**22 I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you."**

**23 Sing for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done this; shout aloud, O earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the LORD has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: "The first element in the divine plan for Israel was redemption from Babylon (43:14–21). The second element, redemption from sin, is now completed: first, we are invited to enter into the mind of God (21–22), and, secondly, to join in the responsive praise of the redeemed."

In these verses the blind man is sent to Siloam to wash off the mud plastered on his eyes to make him come back seeing. God calls Israel back to Himself. Like the prodigal son in Jesus' parable,<sup>1</sup> Israel comes to her senses and says: "What are we doing here?" As with the blind man of Siloam, healing of the eyes does not automatically lead to spiritual salvation. We read: "Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' 'Who is he, sir?' the man asked. 'Tell me so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said, 'You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.' Then the man said, 'Lord, I believe,' and he worshiped him."<sup>2</sup> God calls Israel back to Himself. Earlier we saw that salvation was, so to speak, a byproduct of God's call to Israel to be the instrument of His revelation on earth. Here, the call constitutes a calling back to the original mandate. Although the verses fit Israel's condition upon return from captivity, there is a sense of a call that is universal. When we experience the forgiveness of our sins, we begin to hear the voice that says: "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"<sup>3</sup>

Heaven is called upon to celebrate God's act of redemption. This happened at the birth of Jesus when the angels in heaven could not contain their joy and revealed themselves to shepherds in Bethlehem. We read: "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.'"<sup>4</sup>

The second group called upon to sing is nature: the mountains and the forests. Mountains and trees are not only symbols of God's glory and majesty but also of His grace. God wants us to realize that the One who saves us is also the One who created the beauty by which we are surrounded. It is true that nature cannot tell us the message of salvation. It is only after we are saved that we recognize the connection between the beauty within and without. God does display His glory, although glory of a different kind, in mountains and trees, as He does in Israel. The glory God displays in Israel is greater than the glory of nature. It is the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

#### VIII. THE GREAT DELIVERANCE: THE WORK OF CYRUS (44:24 – 48:22)

##### a. Cyrus: builder and conqueror (44:24–45:8)

###### i. The Lord and his word (44:24–26b)

**24 "This is what the LORD says--your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself,**

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1. Luke 15:17-20

2. John 9:35-38

3. Isa. 6:8

4. Luke 2:13,14

**25 who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense,**

**26 who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,' of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be built,' and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,'**

In introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "Isaiah moves his subject forward a step. The Lord saw the needs of his people in political and spiritual terms (42:18–25). He has stated in outline that these needs will be met (42:18 – 43:21; 43:22 – 44:23). Now he turns to the question 'How?' As to the political deliverance of exiled Israel, the Lord's agent is *his anointed* ... *Cyrus* (45:1); and as to spiritual redemption, the Lord's Agent is *my servant* (49:3). In this way the two passages of promise (42:18 – 43:21; 43:22 – 44:23) are paralleled by two passages of fulfillment (44:24 – 48:22; 49:1 – 55:13). The present section deals with three subject: first, the work of Cyrus (44:24 – 45:8); secondly, Israel's reaction to Cyrus and the Lord's assurances (45: 9 – 46:13); and, thirdly, the fall of Babylon (47:1–15) and the release of the captives (48:1–22). Three self-affirmations by the Lord hold this passage together. The first is the broadest (44:21de; lit. 'I am the Lord who does everything'), a claim to total directive control of the universe; the second (45:7c; lit. 'I am the Lord who does all these things') claims direct responsibility for the Cyrus events, his mission to Jerusalem, Judah and the temple (44:26–28) and his whole career as conqueror (45:1–4); and the third (45:8f), *I, the Lord, have created it* is, in context, most likely a perfect of determination: 'I have determined to create it' commits divine creative power to the total enterprise, making it a direct, sole and unique act of God. All this gives enormous solemnity to the passage: the Lord is solely at work (44:24), wholly at work (45:7) and creatively at work (45:8)."

V.24 is more than a reference to the conception of a human being; it refers to the birth of Israel as a nation, and particularly to God's sovereign election of Israel. As we saw earlier in connection with Rebekah's pregnancy, God's choice of Jacob did not remain unopposed by the powers of darkness.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the same warm assurance David experienced when He realized God's presence in the creation of his person and existence, is contained in the assurance God gives here to Israel as His chosen instrument of revelation. David wrote: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."<sup>2</sup>

God wanted Israel to be fully aware of her position in this world, of her place in God's vast creation, and of her function as warden of God's truth. That fact establishes the link between v.24, 25 and 26. There would be false prophecy concerning God's plans. After Israel had been taken into captivity, some prophets predicted that the exile would be cut short. That was why Jeremiah wrote a letter to the people in exile, stating: "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.' Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,' declares the LORD."<sup>3</sup>

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1. See Gen. 25:21-23.
  2. Ps. 139:13-16
  3. Jer. 29:4-9

Ultimately, God wanted Israel to understand that what looked foolish to them, what seemed to be a total defeat, was God's greatest victory. The Apostle Paul verbalized this precisely in his letter to the Corinthians, saying: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew word for "redeemer" in v.24 is *ga'al*, which refers to a next of kin who has the right to buy back a relative's property, or marry his widow. This is illustrated beautifully in the *Book of Ruth*. When Ruth came home from gleaning wheat, Naomi used the same word in the story: "Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. 'The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz,' she said. 'The LORD bless him!' Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. 'He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.' She added, 'That man is our close relative; he is one of our *kinsman-redeemers*.'" <sup>2</sup> *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states about *go'el*: "*Goel* is the participle of the Hebrew word *ga'al* ('to deliver,' 'to redeem') which aside from its common usage is frequently employed in connection with Hebrew law, where it is the technical term applied to a person who as the nearest relative of another is placed under certain obligations to him." Jesus declared Himself to be the *go'el* when He said: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."<sup>3</sup>

So, this section plays the double theme of redemption and service. The redemption is shown in images of physical and material restoration: return from captivity and rebuilding of Jerusalem, the city. The mention of false prophets refers to the enemy's efforts to muddle the message with his own propaganda. As is evident from Jeremiah's letter, mentioned above, the message of the false prophets was more pleasing to the ear of the captives than the truth of God. The message God's prophets preached was one of death and destruction, of death on the cross. Satan has always manipulated people into servitude by means of fear of death. God used death to defeat the enemy by means of resurrection. The author of Hebrews writes: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death-that is, the devil- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."<sup>4</sup>

This makes the promise of the rebuilding of Jerusalem a proclamation of the resurrection. The destruction of the temple and the city were a shadow of Jesus' death on the cross. The captivity was like the Sabbath day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Zion will ultimately be the emblem of victory over Satan and death.

In the words "who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,'" God looks both forward and back. The drying up of the Red Sea and the Jordan River marked the exodus. We do not read that the return from captivity required any drying up of rivers or seas; the words may be used symbolically. The hymn that was sung to celebrate the crossing of the Red Sea becomes "the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb."<sup>5</sup>

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1. I Cor. 1:18-25
  2. Ruth 2:19, 20
  3. Matt. 20:28
  4. Heb. 2:14,15
  5. See Rev. 15:3.

## ii. The Lord and his purpose (44:26c-28)

**26 That confirmeth the word of his servant, and performeth the counsel of his messengers; that saith to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited; and to the cities of Judah, Ye shall be built, and I will raise up the decayed places thereof:**

**27 That saith to the deep, Be dry, and I will dry up thy rivers:**

**28 That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.**

V.28 mentions Cyrus for the first time. His name will be repeated twice in the next chapter. The occurrence of the name of a person who had not been born or even conceived yet has been a stumbling block for some Bible scholars who cannot believe that supernatural foreknowledge is possible. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, inserts an “Additional Note on the prediction of Cyrus in 44:28”: “Many see the detailed prediction of the personal name of Cyrus in 44:28 as a problem, and suggest a variety of solutions. Those who find difficulty with prediction place the author of the prophecy in Babylon in the thick of the Cyrus events – the so-called ‘Second Isaiah’ ... In this case, the prediction involved would be the prophet’s discernment of Cyrus as liberator. The main difficulty with this view is that it does not forecast only the outcome of Cyrus’ career but also its inception (41:25–27). Furthermore, if the prophet was a resident in Babylon, it is remarkable that his prophecy is totally lacking in ‘local color’ – particularly that he envisaged situations for the exiles which do not accord with their actual state ... but resorts to conventional images; the same can be said of his poetical depiction of the fall of Babylon (47:1ff). Others would argue, though, that it is essential to insist that the Old Testament is our only source book on the subject of Old Testament prophecy. We can, of course, choose to disbelieve what it says, but we must not adjust its testimony to suit modern conventions, tastes or prejudices. The evidence of the Old Testament (as of the New) is that pre-knowledge of personal names is given when, for whatever reason, the situation warrants it (cf. 1 Ki. 13:2 with 2 Ki. 23:15–17; Acts 9:12). This special dimension of prediction is at home in Isaiah, who, more than any other prophet, makes prediction and fulfillment the keystone of his proof that the Lord is the only God.” For the sake of clarity, we copy the embedded Scripture references. “He cried out against the altar by the word of the LORD: ‘O altar, altar! This is what the LORD says: ‘ ‘A son named Josiah will be born to the house of David. On you he will sacrifice the priests of the high places who now make offerings here, and human bones will be burned on you’ ‘ ” (I Kings 13:2). “Even the altar at Bethel, the high place made by Jeroboam son of Nebat, who had caused Israel to sin — even that altar and high place he demolished. He burned the high place and ground it to powder, and burned the Asherah pole also. Then Josiah looked around, and when he saw the tombs that were there on the hillside, he had the bones removed from them and burned on the altar to defile it, in accordance with the word of the LORD proclaimed by the man of God who foretold these things. The king asked, ‘What is that tombstone I see?’ The men of the city said, ‘It marks the tomb of the man of God who came from Judah and pronounced against the altar of Bethel the very things you have done to it’ ” (II Kings 23:15-17). “In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight” (Acts 9:12).

Another example of divine foreknowledge is Samuel’s prediction of what would happen to Saul after the prophet anointed him to be the first king of Israel. We read: “Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on Saul’s head and kissed him, saying, ‘Has not the LORD anointed you leader over his inheritance? When you leave me today, you will meet two men near Rachel’s tomb, at Zelzah on the border of Benjamin. They will say to you, ‘The donkeys you set out to look for have been found. And now your father has stopped thinking about them and is worried about you. He is asking, ‘What shall I do about my son?’ Then you will go on from there until you reach the great tree of Tabor. Three men going up to God at Bethel will meet you there. One will be carrying three young goats, another three loaves of bread, and another a skin of wine. They will greet you and offer you two loaves of bread, which you will accept from them. After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town,

you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, tambourines, flutes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the LORD will come upon you in power, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.”<sup>1</sup> Such a three-fold prediction of unpredictable events was meant to be proof for Saul that his anointing was not a figment of an old man’s imagination, but an act of God.

As Motyer states, the whole veracity of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry hinges on this kind of prediction of future events that no mere mortal could know. If Isaiah does not give us the truth, we have no reason to believe the predictions of the Apostles John and Paul regarding the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ either. Our future hinges on Israel’s past.

iii. The Lord and his anointed (45:1–7)

**1 "This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:**

**2 I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron.**

**3 I will give you the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, who summons you by name.**

**4 For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me.**

**5 I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me,**

**6 so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.**

**7 I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.**

It is obvious that these verses belong to the last verses of the previous chapter and that the division is made arbitrarily.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes about this chapter: “This direct address of God to a heathen king is without a parallel in Scripture. Nebuchadnezzar, Pharaoh, Abimelech, were warned through dreams. Nebuchadnezzar was even promised Divine aid (Ezekiel 30:24, 25). But no heathen monarch had previously been personally addressed by God, much less called ‘his anointed,’ and spoken to *by his name* (ver. 4). Three motives are mentioned for this special favor to him:

- (1) that he might acknowledge Jehovah to be the true God;
- (2) that Israel might be benefited and advantaged by him;
- (3) that the attention of the whole world might be attracted, and the unity of God made manifest far and wide (vers. 3-6).”

God calls Cyrus *mashiyach*, “Messiah,” “anointed,” making him, in a way a type of Christ. Actually, *The Septuagint* renders the opening words “to Cyrus, My Christ.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “Great stress is laid upon the evidential value of naming Cyrus specifically such a long time in advance. The fulfillment of this prediction was to furnish positive proof of the divine authority of this prophecy and the sovereignty of the Revealer, as the only God who exists.”

Isaiah’s prophecy does not make Cyrus into a worshipper of the God of Israel or into a person of high moral character. The divine anointing made him God’s tool for the carrying out of His purpose, with

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1. I Sam. 10:1-7

which Cyrus' purpose happened to coincide. A Dutch *Biblical Handbook* states about Cyrus: "According to an inscription, Cyrus also honored the Babylonian religion. 'When I peacefully entered Babel, their great lord Marduk opened the kind heart of the Babylonians for me, while I took care to daily bring him honor.'" *The Pictorial Bible Dictionary* states about Cyrus: "Cyrus entered Babylon on October 29, 539 B.C. and presented himself in the role of the liberator of the people. He allowed the images of the gods to be transported back to their original cities, and instituted a kindly policy of repatriation for captive peoples. His policies of moderation naturally extended to the Hebrews, whom he encouraged to return to Judea to rebuild their temple."

Although Cyrus comes to us through history as a benevolent monarch, we must not see him as an obedient servant to God. His policy seems to have been that one catches more flies with honey than with vinegar and thus he acted kindly to all peoples he conquered. But he still must have considered himself as the fulfillment of destiny. Most likely, however, he obeyed God's plan because it fitted into his.

In vv.1-3 God promises Cyrus six things, upon the realization of which Cyrus would be able to recognize that the God of Israel was the final authority in heaven and on earth. These six promises were: subduing of nations, disarming of kings, conquest of cities, leveling of mountains, demolition of gates, and acquisition of treasures. "Strip kings of their armor" is the rendering of the Hebrew "I will loose the loins of kings." Daniel records that King Belshazzar had this kind of physical reaction when the party he threw was interrupted by the handwriting on the wall. We read: "Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way."<sup>1</sup> But that reaction was not to the threat of Cyrus' invasion; rather it was because of the supernatural character of the interruption of the festivities.

The Hebrew further read: "To open before him the two-leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, quoting Herodotus, explains: "In the revelry in Babylon on the night of its capture, the inner gates leading from the streets to the river were left open, because there were walls along each side of the Euphrates with gates, which, had they been kept shut, would have hemmed the invading hosts in the bed of the river where the Babylonians could have easily destroyed them. Also, the gates of the palace were left open, so that there was access to every part of the city: and such was its extent, that they who lived in the extremities were taken prisoners before the alarm reached the center of the palace."

The leveling of mountains may be symbolic for the melting away of all opposition. The breaking down of the gates of bronze, etc. again refers to the capture of Babylon. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "According to Herodotus, the gates of Babylon were of solid bronze, and one hundred in number ... Solid bronze gates have, however, nowhere been found, and would have been inconvenient from their enormous weight. It is probable that the 'gates of brass,' or 'bronze,' whereof we read, were always, like these found at Ballarat, of wood plated with bronze. To the eye these would be 'gates of bronze.' Gates of towns were, as a matter of course, secured by bars, which would commonly be made of iron, as the strongest material. Iron was well known to the Babylonians."

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* believes that "the treasures of darkness, riches stored in secret places" may refer to Cyrus' victory over Croesus. We read: "It is agreed that, being a man of an active genius, [Cyrus] soon made himself very considerable, especially when Croesus king of Lydia made a descent upon his country, which he not only repulsed, but revenged, prosecuting the advantages he had gained against Croesus with such vigor that in a little time he took Sardis and made himself master of the rich kingdom of Lydia and the many provinces that then belonged to it. This made him very great (for Croesus was rich to a proverb) and enabled him to pursue his victories in many countries." It could also refer to the treasure of Babylon.

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1. Dan. 5:5,6

All this was predicted so that Cyrus would understand that there was a God in heaven who directed him and used him for the fulfillment of His own purposes with Israel. According to Josephus, Cyrus was introduced to Isaiah's prophecy concerning him, which must have made a profound impression on him. After all, to hear that someone knew about him by name 150 years before his birth cannot fail to have an impact. Even greater and more miraculous is David's prophecy about Jesus: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.'"<sup>1</sup> A footnote in *The New International Version* states: "Septuagint but a body you have prepared for me."

Twice we read that, although God proved Himself to Cyrus by means of this prophecy, Cyrus would not come to the point of acknowledging God as the Lord of heaven and earth. In this King Nebuchadnezzar turned out to be Cyrus' superior. After Daniel revealed to him the dream and its meaning, the king exclaimed: "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery."<sup>2</sup> When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire unharmed, Nebuchadnezzar said: "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way."<sup>3</sup> In connection with his bout of insanity the king reported: "It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation."<sup>4</sup> And: "Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: 'What have you done?' Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble."<sup>5</sup> As far as we know, Cyrus never made it that far. The tragedy of Cyrus was that he obeyed God without surrendering to Him or loving Him. We may find Nebuchadnezzar in heaven, but it seems doubtful that we will see Cyrus. God's choice was Israel, not Cyrus. Cyrus could have become God's chosen one in Israel, as we become God's chosen ones in Christ, but for both of these it takes an act of surrender. No human being will ever know the reason for his being in this world without acknowledging God's master plan and surrendering to it.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, asks a question and answers it: "Are we meant to ask how Cyrus could have come to know the Lord? There can be no doubt how Isaiah would have answered. When Cyrus entered Babylon, it would seem that the resident 'gods' rushed to claim the credit for his triumph. Indeed, in the Cyrus Cylinder, Cyrus acknowledges Marduk as the god behind his career in the same way that he gives the glory to the Lord in Ezra 1:2. The gods had all won and all must have prizes. Soldiering is an uncompromising occupation, but the soldier-become-politician must exchange sword-in-hand for tongue-in-cheek. Yet (Isaiah would say), among all the claimant gods, only One was wise before the event; only One predicted world affairs – and even his name! The God who can thus predict must be the only God (5–6). Cyrus had the evidence but he either did not or would not face its implications." Regarding the Cyrus

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1. Ps. 40:6-8
  2. Dan. 2:47
  3. Dan. 3:28,29
  4. Dan. 4:2,3
  5. Dan. 4:34,35,37

Cylinder, Motyer writes in a footnote: “It was a propagandist account, produced by the priests of Marduk to punish Nabonidus, and it therefore determined to leave no stone unturned in buttering up Cyrus as one raised by Marduk to punish Nabonidus. But, of course, Marduk kept all this to himself until after the event.”

*The New International Version* renders v.7: “I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.” The Hebrew reads literally: “I form and created the light, I make darkness: I create peace and evil: I the Lord do all these things.” It is understandable why Bible scholars stumble over the fact that God seems to claim responsibility for evil in this world. The same can be said about Amos’ statement: “When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?”<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word, rendered “disaster,” or “evil” is *ra`*. The first time we find this word in Scripture is in connection with “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”<sup>2</sup> The creation of this tree did not constitute an introduction of evil in creation; it was an object used to allow man to make a moral choice. It is obvious that death and destruction are not part of God’s character. The presence of God constitutes life, peace, and love. God only causes disaster by withdrawing from the scene. As the body decomposes when the spirit is gone, so the people collapse because God is no longer there. Some disasters are built-in warning devices for disobedience as pain is meant to be for the body. It rings a bell to keep us from destroying ourselves.

iv. The Lord and his created resolve (45:8)

**8 "You heavens above, rain down righteousness; let the clouds shower it down. Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness grow with it; I, the LORD, have created it.**

Evidently, the Hebrew text is difficult to translate into readable English. *Young’s Literal Translation* reads: “Drop, ye heavens, from above, And clouds do cause righteousness to flow, Earth open, and they are fruitful, Salvation and righteousness spring up together, I, Jehovah, have prepared it.” *The Revised Standard Version*: “Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation may sprout forth, and let it cause righteousness to spring up also; I the LORD have created it.” *The New King James Version*: “Rain down, you heavens, from above, And let the skies pour down righteousness; Let the earth open, let them bring forth salvation, And let righteousness spring up together. I, the LORD, have created it.” And *The New American Standard Bible*: “Drip down, O heavens, from above, And let the clouds pour down righteousness; Let the earth open up and salvation bear fruit, And righteousness spring up with it. I, the LORD, have created it.”

The verse reminds us of the introduction to Moses final discourse before God took him up to heaven. He introduced his sermon with: “Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth. Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants.”<sup>3</sup> The sons of Korah used similar language in one of their Psalms: “Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven. The LORD will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest. Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.”<sup>4</sup>

The poetical language assures us that as the water from the sky interacts with the earth below and there is growth and fruitfulness, so God’s righteousness comes down from heaven and brings to life that which is dead because of sin. We could say that, although Cyrus issued the decrees that allowed the Jews to

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1. Amos 3:6

2. See Gen. 2:9

3. Deut. 32:1,2

4. Ps. 85:10-13

return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed, the One who brought about the resurrection of revelation was God, not Cyrus.

Some Old Testament Jewish scholars saw in this passage a reference to the resurrection of the dead. In fact, as the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and its subsequent rebuilding foreshadow the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the interpretation is quite valid.

b. Rebellion and resolve, quibbling and consolation (45:9–46:13)

i. The potter and the parent (45:9–13)

**9 "Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'?"**

**10 Woe to him who says to his father, 'What have you begotten?' or to his mother, 'What have you brought to birth?'"**

**11 "This is what the LORD says — the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?"**

**12 It is I who made the earth and created mankind upon it. My own hands stretched out the heavens; I marshaled their starry hosts.**

**13 I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty."**

In introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "The 'shape' of this section is an important element in its meaning. It is bracketed by matching passages (45:9–13; 46:1–13), each of which covers the same ground. The quarrelsome folk addressed in 45:9–10 appear again as rebels in 46:8; the reaffirmation of the Cyrus plan (45:11–13) is repeated in 46:1–7, 11–13. Each passage is full of divine comfort for troubled Israel: Jerusalem will be rebuilt and the exiles freed (45:13), the Lord continues to carry his people on his broad shoulders (46:3–4). History may not *look* as if it is shaping out for the welfare of God's people but nevertheless it *is*! Within these bracketing passages, 45:14–25 takes up the topic of the place of Israel in the Lord's purposes for the world. The Cyrus plan would not succeed in revealing the Lord on a worldwide scale; the then Israel may think that Cyrus is the negation of the universal hopes they entertained, but the Lord is not deserting his intention that one day *all the ends of the earth will turn ... and be saved* (45:22–23). To the embarrassment of those who rebelled and quibbled, there will be an Israel of God exulting in praise (45:24cd, 25)."

There are two sets of images that govern these verses. It is easier to understand the meaning if we start at the back. God is represented as a parent, or a set of parents (father and mother) having a child and as a potter, making a vessel. Israel is depicted as one person and as a fraction of a broken pot, a potsherd. The theme of these verses is rebellion: the child accuses his parents for his conception and birth and the potsherd accuses the potter for having broken his vessel. The implications of the accusation are profound.

The topic of these verses is a quarrel between the people of Israel and God. The Hebrew word used is *riyb*, which means literally "to toss"; sometimes it means: "to defend." We find it in the verses: "But the herdsmen of Gerar *quarreled* with Isaac's herdsmen and said, 'The water is ours!' So he named the well Esek."<sup>1</sup> But also in: "Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless, for their Defender is strong; he will *take up their case* against you."<sup>2</sup> The reason for the quarrel is not specifically mentioned, but the context seems to indicate that it is about the captivity and subsequent return. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, suggests that it was the fact that a pagan king was involved in the events. We read: "But their problem was real, and their grouching had real substance. When they had lived in Jerusalem before

1. Gen. 26: 20

2. Prov. 23:10,11

the exile, it was as a subject people under a puppet king. However misconceived their successive rebellions against the overlords of Assyria and Babylon had been, they were evidence of a strong groundswell of longing to be a sovereign state under a Davidic king. Of course, far from achieving this, their rebellions had in fact only hastened the end of kingdom, king, land, city and temple. But now, to be told that the exile will end through a pagan king and their home-going will be as a still-subject people with a city and temple rebuilt by his direction – and without any reference to a Davidic restoration – why, they would be even worse off than before!”

But the topic has deeper and further applications. Human beings have argued with their Creator from the beginning of time. David may sing: “All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant,”<sup>1</sup> but most of us tend to disagree. We believe that God could do better and lead us on a path with fewer obstacles and without suffering.

That is that theme of Job’s story. The elements of the potsherd and the rebellious child are very much present in Job. He complained that he was born without his own permission. We read: “After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. He said: ‘May the day of my birth perish, and the night it was said, ‘A boy is born!’ ’ ”<sup>2</sup> The message of *The Book of Job* seems to be that every human life is played out against the background of the universal controversy between God and Satan. When God revealed Himself to Job as His Creator, the argument was settled for Job. God used Job to prove His righteousness to Satan. All suffering God allows in this world is for that same purpose.

It is true that we are all born without our consent and that human life is like broken pottery. God answers our complaint by showing that, in the words of the Apostle Paul, “through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life [sets us] free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus was the only human being ever born by His own consent. Both His birth and death were voluntary. By becoming a broken potsherd in our place, He brought us back to what God intended us to be when He created us. If we understand this, we comprehend that “All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful.”

The prophet Jeremiah elaborates the theme of the potter in detail.<sup>4</sup> We find our peace if we recognize God as the potter and ourselves as the clay in His hand. If we do, we will share James’ wisdom and “Consider it pure joy ... whenever [we] face trials of many kinds, because [we] know that the testing of [our] faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that [we] may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”<sup>5</sup>

The Hebrew word *yatsar* occurs six times in this chapter. The original meaning is “to squeeze into shape.” As such it is variously rendered “Maker” or “potter.” We find it for the first time in the verse “the LORD God *formed* the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”<sup>6</sup>

Bible scholars differ in their opinion about the proper translation of v.11. *The New International Version* reads the verse as a question: “Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?” *The New King James Version* reads: “Ask Me of things to come concerning My sons; And concerning the work of My hands, you command Me.” *The Living Bible* follows the question mode with the paraphrase: “What right have you to question what I do? Who are you to

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1. Ps. 25:10
  2. Job 3:1-3
  3. Rom. 8:2-4
  4. See Jer. 18:1-13.
  5. James 1:2-4
  6. Gen. 2:7

command me concerning the work of my hands?" The context of this chapter makes the question sound more logical. Apparently, it is Israel who asks the question, not about her existence but about her calling. Throughout her history, Israel has wrestled with the consequences of being called to be a kingdom of priests. Things came to a head in the days of Samuel when the people said to Samuel: "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have." God said to Samuel: "it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you."<sup>1</sup>

Being called to serve the Lord in a sinful world has dire consequences. It means swimming against the current and often involves emotional and physical suffering. When God told Ananias to visit Saul in Damascus, He said: "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah experienced the agony of God's call and he cried out: "O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. I hear many whispering, 'Terror on every side! Report him! Let's report him!' All my friends are waiting for me to slip, saying, 'Perhaps he will be deceived; then we will prevail over him and take our revenge on him.'"<sup>3</sup> Following the Lord has consequences. The Apostle Paul warned Timothy: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."<sup>4</sup> We cannot be used by God and lead an easy life at the same time.

In these verses God reveals Himself as the Creator and the potter. Because He made us, like He formed Adam out of the clay, so He has the right to form us for whatever use He intends to make of us. He made both Israel and Cyrus. He allowed His people to go into exile and to return by the way He chose. He let His Son become a human being and die for the sins of the world in order to defeat Satan and death. And Jesus did not revolt against the Father's call, but instead we read: "When Christ came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am — it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, O God.'"<sup>5</sup>

ii. An unchanged worldwide purpose for Israel (45:14–25)

***14 This is what the LORD says: "The products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and those tall Sabeans — they will come over to you and will be yours; they will trudge behind you, coming over to you in chains. They will bow down before you and plead with you, saying, 'Surely God is with you, and there is no other; there is no other god.'"***

***15 Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel.***

***16 All the makers of idols will be put to shame and disgraced; they will go off into disgrace together.***

***17 But Israel will be saved by the LORD with an everlasting salvation; you will never be put to shame or disgraced, to ages everlasting.***

***18 For this is what the LORD says — he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited — he says: "I am the LORD, and there is no other.***

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1. See I Sam. 8:5-8.  
 2. Acts 9:16  
 3. Jer. 20:7-10  
 4. II Tim. 3:12  
 5. Heb. 10:5-7

**19 I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain.' I, the LORD, speak the truth; I declare what is right.**

**20 "Gather together and come; assemble, you fugitives from the nations. Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood, who pray to gods that cannot save.**

**21 Declare what is to be, present it — let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.**

**22 "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.**

**23 By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.**

**24 They will say of me, 'In the LORD alone are righteousness and strength.'" All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame.**

**25 But in the LORD all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: "This passage replies to the unspoken assumption behind verses 9–13 (and 46:1–13) that the Davidic promises have been lost in a Gentile take-over. It was part of the Davidic vision that the promised king would rule the nations (9:7; 11:12–16; Ps. 2:7–12). Isaiah does not relate the present passage explicitly to the Davidic hope, but its content is inseparable from the expectation of the king who is to come. There are two divisions, 14–17 and 18–25, each beginning with *This is what the LORD says* (14a, 18a) and each ending with the triumph of Israel (17, 25). In verses 14–17 the keynote is the centrality of Israel in the Lord's worldwide plans as Gentiles submit to Israel on the ground that the only God is found among them (14); in 18–25 the keynote is the reality of co-equal membership in the Israel of God as Gentiles respond to the universal invitation to turn to the Lord and be saved. (Cf. the vision of 'one world, one people, one Lord,' 19:24–25; 27:12–13)."

There are different opinions about the meaning of these verses. *Barnes' Notes* believes that "it has reference to the conversion of the Gentiles, and their admission into the church of God." Some, however, understand it as addressed to Cyrus, meaning that, because he had released the Jews without reward, therefore God would give him the wealth of Egypt, Ethiopia, Sabaea, and that those nations should be subject to him. *Barnes' Notes* states: "Some of the Jewish interpreters suppose that it refers to the same events as those recorded in Isa 43:3, and that it relates to the fact that God had formerly given those nations for the deliverance and protection of his people. They suppose that particular reference is made to the slaughter and destruction of the army of Sennacherib."

It is obvious that Isaiah directs his vision to Africa, to the northeastern part of it. Egypt and Ethiopia are the main points of focus. The reference to the tall Sabeans may refer to the Arabian Peninsula. *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary* believes that Sheba is "now known as Yemen." "Coming over to you in chains" can hardly refer to literal slavery. The bonds that tie these people to Israel is the fact of God's revelation. Zechariah also prophesied after Israel's return from captivity: "And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him. This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.' ' "1 The "one Jew" is our Lord Jesus Christ.

The question about v.15 is who is the speaker. It is obvious that God is addressed, but is it Isaiah who feels that God is hiding Himself or is it the people mentioned in the previous verse? Since God revealed Himself so clearly to Isaiah, we either interpret this as words being spoken about God by the people who are drawn to Israel for salvation, or to the mystery of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul refers to God's plan for the salvation of the Gentiles as "a mystery." He wrote to the Ephesians: "Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by

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1. Zech. 8:22,23

revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."<sup>1</sup> Jesus explains the paradox of the Gospel in His parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field."<sup>2</sup>

There is a sense in which God does not hide Himself. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge."<sup>3</sup> And the Apostle Paul writes: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."<sup>4</sup> But the knowledge of God that leads to salvation cannot be obtained by merely observing nature. We do not receive forgiveness of our sins by looking at sunsets or thunderstorms. The Apostle Paul explained to the philosophers in Athens: "From one man [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us."<sup>5</sup> God reveals Himself to those who seek Him. David sings: "The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him, And He will show them His covenant."<sup>6</sup> The Israel that will be saved is the body of Christ, consisting of Jews and Gentiles. The shame of sin Adam and Eve experienced is lifted from us in the atonement of Jesus Christ. "No one whose hope is in God will ever be put to shame."<sup>7</sup> If we stoop to powers that are lower than we are, we disgrace ourselves. If we surrender to Him who is above all, we will be lifted up.

Vv.18 and 19 give us God's answer to those who believe God hides Himself. In awesome language He refers to Himself as the Creator of heaven and earth. The verb "formed" is *yatsar*, the same that was rendered "potter" earlier. God created the earth "not to be empty," in Hebrew: "not in vain," that is not without a purpose or meaning. The Hebrew word *tohuw* is found the first time in the verse: "Now the earth was *formless* and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters."<sup>8</sup> We may not be able to find the way of salvation by looking at nature, but we do see something of the greatness of Him who created. Nature does not only testify to intelligent design, it also bears witness to purposeful design. What God creates has meaning.

These words are spoken against the background of the Babylonian captivity, which seemed to be the most meaningless chapter in the history of the Jewish nation. What was the meaning of life of those who saw their infants seized and dashed against the rocks?<sup>9</sup> Satan makes life meaningless; God is the only meaning for existence. It is to people who are overwhelmed by the apparent meaninglessness of life that God says: "Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause

1. Eph. 3:2-6
2. Matt. 13:44
3. Ps. 19:1,2
4. Rom. 1:18-20
5. Acts 17:26,27
6. Ps. 25:14 – *New King James Version*
7. See Ps. 25:3.
8. Gen. 1:2
9. See Ps. 137:9.

is disregarded by my God'? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom."<sup>1</sup>

It is the Creator of the universe who says that we will not seek Him in vain. He gives shape and meaning to a formless earth. He infuses meaning in meaningless existence. He heals the brokenhearted. "The earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."<sup>2</sup>

These words are not only addressed to Israel returning from captivity, but to all "fugitives from the nations" (v.20). The fact that Isaiah prophesied this about a century before the onset of the captivity and 150 years before the beginning of the restoration, gives them a tinge of eternity. They help us to see that our hardships and desperate situations do not take God by surprise. They are meant to speak to us when we find ourselves in the depth. Corrie ten Boom met the Lord in a newer and deeper way in a Nazi concentration camp where her sister died. God does not die in prisons and torture chambers. He is there to make His children live. Ezekiel and Daniel met God in Babylon in a way they could not have met Him in Jerusalem.

Vv.22-25 are addressed to the whole world. The main topic of these verses is not salvation but God's glory: "Before me every knee will bow." That is why Jesus introduces the great commission to evangelize the world with a reference to His authority. We read: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."<sup>3</sup> Salvation is, in a way, a byproduct of this authority and glory. But for us, who were lost, salvation is so important because it is the beginning; without it there will be no life.

In the context of these verses salvation means trusting in God instead of putting one's hope in idols. God is the only one who can save and He saves exclusively through Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection. As J. Alec Motyer observes, the mode of salvation is illustrated in the incident in which the Israelites were bitten by poisonous snakes while in the desert. We read: "The LORD said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived."<sup>4</sup> In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus pointed out that this was an image of His death on the cross. He said: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."<sup>5</sup>

In v.23 God refers to an oath He had sworn, saying that every knee would bow before Him and every tongue would swear by His Name. The Hebrew word "to swear" is *shaba`*, which literally means: "to repeat seven times." In order to understand the full impact of this we must place it against the background of the controversy between God and Satan. God's goal with creation is "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."<sup>6</sup> This is what God had in mind when He swore a similar oath to Abraham after he had sacrificed Isaac. We read: "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."<sup>7</sup>

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1. Isa. 40:26-28
  2. Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14
  3. Matt. 28:18-20
  4. Num. 21:8,9
  5. John 3:14,15
  6. Phil. 2:10,11

The bowing of the knee is linked to swearing by God. This means that as we worship God alone our lives will demonstrate His integrity. The Hebrew text of v.24 reads literally: “Surely in the LORD shall one say, I have righteousness and strength.” If we acknowledge that our righteousness is not in ourselves but in the Almighty, we will experience the strength of omnipotence. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, remarks: “*Righteousness* is plural, signifying ‘true righteousness, righteousness in all its fullness,’ that is to say, all that makes his people right with God, conformity to his character and requirements. This inner reality is matched by *strength* to live out this new relationship and status.” This also is given to us in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, in the words of the Apostle Paul, “has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”<sup>1</sup>

“All who have raged against him” are the ones David describes in the Second Psalm: “The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. ‘Let us break their chains,’ they say, ‘and throw off their fetters.’”<sup>2</sup> Their rage is more than anger. The Hebrew word *charah* means: “to blaze with anger or jealousy.” We find the word in the verse: “So Cain was *very angry*, and his face was downcast.”<sup>3</sup> It is anger that spells murder, such as was evinced in the crucifixion of Christ.

The descendants of Israel are what the Apostle Paul calls “the Israel of God.”<sup>4</sup> J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes about this: “A merely national significance of *Israel* would make nonsense of the whole argument from verse 14 onwards. The Lord has promised and predicted worldwide salvation, and here, as in 17, the honored name of *Israel* casts its mantle over a worldwide confessing community. Within the community there are not first- and second-class citizens: the description *descendants* (lit. ‘seed’) indicates reality of belonging and co-equality of status. All are ‘born there’ (Ps. 87:4–6).”

iii. The unchanging Lord and his stubborn rebels (46:1–13)

**1** *Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low; their idols are borne by beasts of burden. The images that are carried about are burdensome, a burden for the weary.*

**2** *They stoop and bow down together; unable to rescue the burden, they themselves go off into captivity.*

**3** *"Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all you who remain of the house of Israel, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth.*

**4** *Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.*

**5** *"To whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?*

**6** *Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it.*

**7** *They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Though one cries out to it, it does not answer; it cannot save him from his troubles.*

**8** *"Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels.*

**9** *Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.*

**10** *I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.*

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7. Gen. 22:16-18

1. I Cor. 1:30

2. Ps. 2:2,3

3. Gen. 4:5

4. Gal. 6:16

**11 From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.**

**12 Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are far from righteousness.**

**13 I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: “These verses are both parallel to and different from 45:9–13. Both passages expose Israel’s opposition to the Cyrus plan (45:9–10; 46:8, 12) and reaffirm that, none the less, the plan will go forward; the Lord can be as stubborn as his people (45:13; 46:10–11, 13)! – but 46:1–13 majors on the Lord’s care for them (3–4) and also goes beyond the earlier passage in the severity of its condemnation of rebellious Israel. In other words, while 46:1–13 fundamentally says the same thing as 45:9–13, it also takes into account the material traversed in 45:14–25, that Israel is central to the Lord’s world purposes and that, in all he does, he safeguards them as special and therefore is prepared to expose unsparingly (8, 12) how exceedingly culpable is their opposition. Isaiah expresses this in a vigorous poem in five sections.”

Motyer then outlines these five points: (1) The burdening gods (1,2), (2) The burden-bearing God (3,4), (3) The made gods, unable to save (5-7), (4) The living God (8-11) and (5) The saving God (12,13).

**(1) The burdening gods – 1,2.**

Bel and Nebo were the main idols worshipped in Babylon. Archeology has connected these names with the Greek/Roman gods of Jupiter and Mercury, but that has no bearing upon our present study. The name Nebo appears in the name Nebuchadnezzar and Bel in Belshazzar, proving that their worship was linked to the power that made Babylon the empire it became.

The fall of these gods is symbolic for the end of the era. J. Alex Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “Now the heart of the matter as regards Israel is imminent – the fall of Babylon – and we are given privileged seats as the great ‘gods’ of Babylon sway down from their pedestals to lie prone on wagons to be unceremoniously carted off from the doomed city. It did not happen, of course, in this way. Isaiah is dealing with pictures and principles ... his purpose is not to describe but to expose. There is no recorded evacuation of Babylon in anticipation of Cyrus’ assault, but in a strikingly visual way Isaiah presents the truth that these gods cannot save (*cf.* 2:20) and, when the crunch comes, are themselves dependent on pack-animals!” The scene reminds us of the confrontation between God and the Philistine idol Dagon. When the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant and placed it in the temple of their idol, they twice found Dagon prostrate before the Ark.<sup>1</sup> More recently on the political scene, we saw the fall of Saddam Hussein symbolized in the pulling down of his statue in Baghdad.

As Isaiah depicts the idols themselves going into captivity, there simultaneously seems to be a reference to Israel’s captivity as a result of their worship of Bel or Baal, as he was known among the Phoenicians. The gods in which they had put their trust were even less able to help themselves than they were.

**(2) The burden-bearing God – vv.3,4.**

Sharply contrasting to the idols that were being carried away by beasts of burden, God carries His people. Even before their captivity, the idols had to be carried around. God is not dependent upon human arms for His transportation. In Moses’ words: “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”<sup>2</sup>

The whole nation of Israel is seen here as one single person. God’s “everlasting arms” carried Israel from the moment it came into being as a fetus to old age. The remnant of Israel is, obviously, those who were to return from captivity. The whole tone of these verses is one of comfort and encouragement, meant to make Israel realize the purpose for their existence. In His dealings with Israel, God has His eye on “the ends

1. See I Sam. 5:1-5.

2. Deut. 33:27

of the earth” (45:22). God’s vision for the universe is another feature that distinguishes Him from the manmade idols that were local deities.

There is, of course, much in these verses that one can apply personally as one goes through the process of growing old. As life becomes lonelier toward the end the assurance of being cradled in God’s arms can be a source of deep comfort and security.

**(3) The made gods, unable to save – vv.5-7.**

Isaiah uses three verbs to define God’s incomparability. The first, *damah* is used twice, meaning: “to compare in order to detect any resemblance.” The second, *shavah*, suggests equality or the lack of it. The third, *mashal*, speaks of any resemblance to speak of. The word is sometimes used to denote a parable. Vv.6 and 7 depict the same fabrication of statues as was described earlier; the difference here is that the material used is gold. Whether gold or wood or any other substance, the end product is man’s creation which is less than man himself. In bowing to an idol man has to lower himself to the level of something that is dead. In worshipping God he chooses life and raises himself up. As *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “In order to be manly, we must be godly: for man was made ‘in the image of God,’ and only rises to his true dignity when joined to God.”

**(4) The living God – vv.8-11.**

God addresses Israel here as *pasha`*, people who rebel against authority, who revolt against God. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, believes that the rebellion is against God’s plan to use the pagan power of Cyrus over Israel. We read: “It is hard to cut through disappointment and bewilderment to this point of comfort. Israel wanted a Davidic restoration and they got Cyrus! What a disappointment! They were nonplussed by what their God was doing.” Motyer may have a point here, because even the disciples asked Jesus after the resurrection: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”<sup>1</sup> But against the background of their idolatrous practices, more than mere nationalism must have been the issue.

*The New International Version’s* “fix it in mind” is the rendering of the Hebrew word *‘iysh*, “to be a man.” This is the only place in Scripture where this word is used. *The New King James Version* translates it: “show yourselves men.” The unusual use of the word has given birth to various interpretations from “man yourself,” to “show yourself firm,” to “act as a man would, take a rational account of things.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “There is no use pretending that our knowledge of Hebrew – either in vocabulary or meaning – is anything like complete, and ‘prove yourselves men’ could well be the prophet’s intention. He has been contending against the sheer stupidity of idolatry. Israel did and could know better – if only they would take a thoughtful account of things as humans should.” We may assume that God appeals to man’s logic, saying: “think this through and see if it makes sense.” It has been the argument against idolatry, that it made no sense that the same piece of wood that is used as fuel would have the ability to give help in spiritual matters.<sup>2</sup> If man has trouble believing in God there is a lot of evidence that he has to disregard, evidence that demands a verdict. As Jesus said to His disciples: “Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.”<sup>3</sup> So God says to Israel: “How do you explain the exodus from Egypt, the conquest of Canaan, the very fact of your existence as a nation and the miracles that accompanied all this?” Take God out of the equation and nothing makes sense anymore.

The problem with prophecy is that it can only be verified in retrospect. It is only when the future has become the past that one can see whether what was predicted was true. In that sense, Isaiah’s words are meant for future generations. But the people of Isaiah’s day had enough miracles in their history to recognize that God had something to do with it.

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1. Acts 1:6

2. See Isa.44:13-17.

3. John 14:11

Another point of contention among Bible scholars has been the “bird of prey” in v.11. Both Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus had an eagle on their banner. Since Cyrus has been the main character in these predictions, he seems to be the most logical candidate to fit the picture here.

**(5) The saving God – vv.12, 13.**

“Stubborn-hearted” is the rendering of the Hebrew words *‘abbiyr leb*. *Leb* means “heart” and *‘abbiyr* is “strong.” We find the latter in the Psalm describing Christ’s crucifixion: “Many bulls surround me; *strong bulls* of Bashan encircle me.”<sup>1</sup>

Two other important Hebrew words form the core of the last verses of this chapter: *tsedaqah*, “righteousness,” and *teshuw`ah*, “salvation.” God brings His righteousness close to those who keep their distance from it. Heaven came down to us instead of our going up. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”<sup>2</sup> The first time *tsedaqah* is used in Scripture is in the verse: “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”<sup>3</sup> *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes: “We have here the side of light and love, turned towards us by the two-faced *tsedaqah*, as a parallel word to *teshuw`ah*, or salvation. With this admonition to the indifferent and careless, to whom the salvation of which they have given up all hope is proclaimed as at the door, this prophecy is brought to a close. In three distinct stages, commencing with ‘hearken,’ ‘remember,’ ‘hearken,’ it has unfolded the spiritual influences which the fact declared in vv. 1, 2 ought to have upon Israel, and resembles a pastoral sermon in its tone.”

c. Free at last (47:1–48:22)

i. Pride before a fall (47:1–15)

**1 "Go down, sit in the dust, Virgin Daughter of Babylon; sit on the ground without a throne, Daughter of the Babylonians. No more will you be called tender or delicate.**

**2 Take millstones and grind flour; take off your veil. Lift up your skirts, bare your legs, and wade through the streams.**

**3 Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered. I will take vengeance; I will spare no one."**

**4 Our Redeemer — the LORD Almighty is his name — is the Holy One of Israel.**

**5 "Sit in silence, go into darkness, Daughter of the Babylonians; no more will you be called queen of kingdoms.**

**6 I was angry with my people and desecrated my inheritance; I gave them into your hand, and you showed them no mercy. Even on the aged you laid a very heavy yoke.**

**7 You said, 'I will continue forever — the eternal queen!' But you did not consider these things or reflect on what might happen.**

**8 "Now then, listen, you wanton creature, lounging in your security and saying to yourself, 'I am, and there is none besides me. I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.'**

**9 Both of these will overtake you in a moment, on a single day: loss of children and widowhood. They will come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and all your potent spells.**

**10 You have trusted in your wickedness and have said, 'No one sees me.' Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you when you say to yourself, 'I am, and there is none besides me.'**

**11 Disaster will come upon you, and you will not know how to conjure it away. A calamity will fall upon you that you cannot ward off with a ransom; a catastrophe you cannot foresee will suddenly come upon you.**

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1. Ps. 22:12

2. John 1:14

3. Gen. 15:6

**12 "Keep on, then, with your magic spells and with your many sorceries, which you have labored at since childhood. Perhaps you will succeed, perhaps you will cause terror.**

**13 All the counsel you have received has only worn you out! Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them save you from what is coming upon you.**

**14 Surely they are like stubble; the fire will burn them up. They cannot even save themselves from the power of the flame. Here are no coals to warm anyone; here is no fire to sit by.**

**15 That is all they can do for you — these you have labored with and trafficked with since childhood. Each of them goes on in his error; there is not one that can save you.**

By way of introduction, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says about this section: "In October 539 BC, Cyrus advanced into lower Mesopotamia and, leaving Babylon till last, conquered and occupied the surrounding territory. Seeing which way the wind was blowing, Nabonidus of Babylon deserted his city, leaving it in the charge of his son, Belshazzar. For whatever reason, the taking of Babylon was as bloodless and effortless as Daniel 6 implies. Certainly the priests of Marduk, Babylon's patron god, had their noses put out of joint by Nabonidus' religious fervor for other gods, and the Cyrus Cylinder represents Marduk as accompanying Cyrus on the march and 'made him enter his town ... sparing Babylon any calamity.' Very likely the priests of Marduk connived with Cyrus and secured his entry while Belshazzar feasted. But of all this drama Isaiah says nothing! This would be impossible to explain if indeed we are dealing with a 'Second Isaiah' resident in the city at the time. Chapter 47 looks meditatively at the situation: Babylon fell because of divine vengeance (1–7), pride (8–11) and impotence of false religion (12–15)."

*The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* states about the opening verses: "Isaiah's artistic style may be readily perceived both in the three clauses of v. 1 that are comparable to a long trumpet-blast ... and also in the short, rugged, involuntarily excited clauses that follow."

Isaiah describes the fall of Babylon from the point of view of the city itself. Jeremiah would later report it from the side of outside witnesses, saying: "Announce and proclaim among the nations, lift up a banner and proclaim it; keep nothing back, but say, 'Babylon will be captured; Bel will be put to shame, Marduk filled with terror. Her images will be put to shame and her idols filled with terror.'"<sup>1</sup> The image of a virgin for the city of Babylon describes the way Babylon saw herself. It was the physical beauty of the city for which King Nebuchadnezzar took all the credit that brought about his insanity.<sup>2</sup> Babylon applied the words "tender or delicate" to herself. The fact that the empire had conquered nations and subdued people with extreme cruelty does not enter the picture here.

It is with this tenderness and delicacy that God takes issue. It is not what we think ourselves to be, it is what God thinks of us that counts. This fine lady becomes a slave girl who is reduced to performing menial jobs and whose prudery is violated in the exposition of her nakedness. Babylon's true nature is exposed in God's judgment. Her beauty was a disguise for demonic power that opposed God's revelation on earth. As such Babylon became the emblem of corruption in Scripture. *The Book of Revelation* reveals this tender and delicate virgin as "The mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth."<sup>3</sup> At the end of time this citadel of Satan will come down in the same way as this type in the Old Testament. We read: "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird. For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Jer. 50:2

2. Dan. 4:28-33

3. Rev. 17:5

4. Rev. 18:2,3

Where *The New International Version* reads: “Lift up your skirts,” *The New King James Version* renders v.2 “Remove your veil.” This is the translation of the Hebrew words *galah tsammah*. The only other place where *tsammah* is used is in *The Song of Solomon*, where it is sometimes translated “veil” and other times “hair.”<sup>1</sup> Isaiah’s text denotes a condition of going into captivity. The Lord Almighty, *Yahweh Tsabaaowt*, the Holy One of Israel is called *Goel*, that is the next of kin who has the right to ransom the family member who faces bankruptcy or slavery.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on v.6: “As in 10:5–15, though Babylonian action against *my people ... my inheritance* (6ab) was formally within the will of God, it was nevertheless an offence to him. It was not that the situation got out of the Lord’s control and Babylon inflicted more than was deserved. Their sin lay in the assumptions behind their actions and in their manner: pitilessness (*no mercy*, 6d; specifically ‘compassion,’ tender feeling that that should have restrained them), indiscriminateness (*even on the aged*, 6e), arrogance (*for ever ... eternal queen*, 7b), absence of moral thoughtfulness (*did not consider ... what might happen*, 7c; lit. ‘the outcome of it’). The holy will of the holy God must be done in a way suited to that holiness – personally as well as collectively. The Old Testament does not subscribe to the view that ‘war is war’ – a situation where the moral and humanitarian restraints which ordinarily operate are in abeyance and where outrageous deeds can be done by a private individual (e.g. Am. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13). Babylon assumed a right to tenure (*continue*), authority (*queen*) and immunity (*what might happen*) – ever the blind spots of the imperialist and of those at the top. Consider: ‘lay to heart,’ take a thoughtful view. Reflect ... *happen* should be rather stronger: ‘remember ... the outcome.’ It is not a matter of ‘might happen’ but of ‘remembering’ that they live in a moral world ruled by a holy God in which crime and punishment are inseparable.”

God calls Babylon a “wanton creature.” *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “No city was more corrupt in its morals; nowhere were there so many excitements to licentious and guilty pleasures.” Babylon assumed that she would last eternally, that there would be no day of reckoning. “I will never be a widow or suffer the loss of children.” *The Book of Revelation* applies this to the world at large: “For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.” “In her heart she boasts, ‘I sit as queen; I am not a widow, and I will never mourn.’”<sup>2</sup>

“Wanton” in v.8 is the translation of the Hebrew word *’adiyn* meaning: “voluptuous.” This is the only place in Scripture where this word is used. *The King James Version* renders it “given to pleasures.” Babylon felt safe enough to give herself to the enjoyment of sensuous pleasures because of the demonic protection under which she had voluntarily placed herself. Magic spells and sorcery gave her a sense of security. This attitude has been compared to a farmer asking the fox to protect his chickens. *The Pulpit Commentary* states that, according to Herodotus, when Cyrus invaded the city, the inhabitants “made light of his siege” and that no one had made any significant preparations for defending Babylon. The Babylonians had adopted the same attitude as the people of Jerusalem who had said: “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die!”<sup>3</sup> They had not considered that the way we live determines what will happen to us when we die.

Isaiah predicts that Babylon would be destroyed “in a moment, on a single day.” This does not mean that Babylon would instantaneously become a ruin. *Barnes’ Notes* states: “In the single night in which Babylon was taken by Cyrus, a death-blow was given to all her greatness and power, and at that moment a train of causes was originated which did not cease to operate until it became a pile of ruins.” *The Pulpit Commentary* observes that “in a day” refers to “The day of the capture of the city by Cyrus, which was the third of Marchesvan, B.C. 539. Then, ‘in a moment,’ Babylon lost the whole of her prestige, ceased to reign, ceased to be an independent power, became a ‘widow,’ had a portion of her population turn from her, was brought down to the dust. Loss of children, and widowhood came upon her in their perfection; *i.e.* ‘in the full extent of their bitterness’ ... Not that Cyrus imitated her common practice by carrying off her entire

1. See Song 4:1,3; 6:7.
2. Rev. 18:3,7
3. Isa. 22:13

population; on the contrary, she continued for more than two centuries to be a flourishing and populous town. Twice she revolted from Darius Hystaspis ... once, perhaps, from Xerxes .... Alexander the Great found her walls and her great buildings in ruins, but still she was a considerable place. Cyrus, however, no doubt, carried off a portion of her population, which thenceforth begun to dwindle, and continually became less and less as time went on, until she sank into a solitude. That extreme desolation which the prophets paint in such vivid colors (... Isaiah 12:19-22; 14:22, 23; ... Jeremiah 50:10:15, 38-40; 2:36-43) was potentially contained in the capture by Cyrus, which was the work of a single day."

Vv.12-15 deal in greater detail with the source of Babylon's security: magic spells, sorcery and astrology, all demonically inspired efforts to manipulate the supernatural. The stargazers are compared to stubble that will burn so quickly that it does not even generate sufficient heat to be of any use. Like "the wicked" in Psalm One, "They are like chaff that the wind blows away."<sup>1</sup> As the magicians at Pharaoh's court in the days of Moses and the ones in Daniel's day before Nebuchadnezzar, they are powerless and unable to explain what the Lord is doing. The only ones who would show any signs of intelligence were the magi who came to worship Jesus in Bethlehem.

Again, the most amazing feature of this prophecy is the fact that it was pronounced about 150 years before its fulfillment.

ii. Home, yet not home (48:1-22)

*1 "Listen to this, O house of Jacob, you who are called by the name of Israel and come from the line of Judah, you who take oaths in the name of the LORD and invoke the God of Israel — but not in truth or righteousness —*

*2 you who call yourselves citizens of the holy city and rely on the God of Israel — the LORD Almighty is his name:*

*3 I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass.*

*4 For I knew how stubborn you were; the sinews of your neck were iron, your forehead was bronze.*

*5 Therefore I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you so that you could not say, 'My idols did them; my wooden image and metal god ordained them.'*

*6 You have heard these things; look at them all. Will you not admit them? "From now on I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you.*

*7 They are created now, and not long ago; you have not heard of them before today. So you cannot say, 'Yes, I knew of them.'*

*8 You have neither heard nor understood; from of old your ear has not been open. Well do I know how treacherous you are; you were called a rebel from birth.*

*9 For my own name's sake I delay my wrath; for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you, so as not to cut you off.*

*10 See, I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.*

*11 For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another.*

*12 "Listen to me, O Jacob, Israel, whom I have called: I am he; I am the first and I am the last.*

*13 My own hand laid the foundations of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I summon them, they all stand up together.*

*14 "Come together, all of you, and listen: Which of [the idols] has foretold these things? The LORD's chosen ally will carry out his purpose against Babylon; his arm will be against the Babylonians.*

*15 I, even I, have spoken; yes, I have called him. I will bring him, and he will succeed in his mission.*

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1. Ps. 1:4

**16 "Come near me and listen to this: "From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret; at the time it happens, I am there." And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me, with his Spirit.**

**17 This is what the LORD says — your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.**

**18 If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your righteousness like the waves of the sea.**

**19 Your descendants would have been like the sand, your children like its numberless grains; their name would never be cut off nor destroyed from before me."**

**20 Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians! Announce this with shouts of joy and proclaim it. Send it out to the ends of the earth; say, "The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob."**

**21 They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split the rock and water gushed out.**

**22 "There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked."**

As was observed at the end of the previous section, the time factor is the important element and the theme of these verses. God spoke to Judah through Isaiah to warn them of the coming judgment, the Babylonian captivity. Although it is presented as unavoidable, the fact that judgment was announced beforehand means that it could be avoided by repentance. That is the lesson we can draw from *The Book of Jonah*. God's announcements of judgment are always acts of mercy. Since Israel's sin made the captivity unavoidable, this chapter looks at the return from captivity and issues a warning to those who will return to rebuild.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, gives the following insightful introduction to this section: "In this chapter Isaiah heralds the departure of the exiles from Babylon and their embarkation on a protected journey home – a mini-exodus (20–21). Thus Cyrus has fulfilled his vocation within the plan of God (44:26–28) in the manifesto of deliverance sketched in 42:18 – 43:21. Step by step the prophet's theme develops. Alongside the joy of deliverance and the prospect of home-coming, however, lies another, and darker, truth. With a suddenness that has led some commentators to pronounce it a later intrusion into the text, verse 22 states flatly that *there is no peace for the wicked*. But, abrupt though it is, a careful reading of the chapter shows that it is not inappropriate. Who is this people delivered from Babylon and shepherded home? They are people who have forfeited the right to the name *Israel* (1–2), *stubborn* (4), idolatrous (5), inattentive, uncomprehending, *treacherous* and *a rebel* (8). So savage and unrelenting is this tide of indictment that again commentators have wondered how it could originate in one whom they call (from 40:1) 'the prophet of comfort.' How can he be so 'uncomfortable'? But we should rather ask if, in the light of his development of his theme from 38:1 onwards, Isaiah could have spoken here in any other terms. After all, it was the dire sin of unbelief that landed the people in Babylon in the first place (39:1–8). They are obsessed by morbid self-pity (40:27); the Lord's blind servant (42:18), in bondage for failing his law; spiritually insensitive to chastisement (42:21–22, 25); culpably blind and deaf (43:8); weary of the Lord and corrupting true religion (43:22–24); stung by nationalistic pride into rejecting the Cyrus plan and impervious to warning (45:9–13), reassurance (45:14–25) and appeal (46:1–13); arguing with the Lord beyond the point of possibility and propriety (45:9ff.); rebellious (46:8), stubborn (46:12) and far from righteousness (46:12). Thus chapter 48 stands out from chapters 38 – 47, not because it is alien but because it is climactic. What is diffused throughout the earlier chapters is concentrated here into one. To return home from Babylon, then, is not to come home to God: *there is no peace for the wicked*. A change of address is not a change of heart. Great as was the deliverance from political captivity, peace with God, deliverance from sin, is another matter altogether and has yet to be accomplished. But this too is announced here in principle. Verses 3–6b and 6c–7 deal respectively with *former things* and *new things*; in the broadly parallel sections of chapter 48 (1–11, 12–22) the matching verses supply the interpretation: *the former things* are the Cyrus plan (14–15), and *the new things* begin with the advent of the Servant (16). In faithfulness the Lord has kept the Cyrus promises, but he has yet more in store for his people."

Vv.1 and 2 depict Israel in terms of what it believed itself to be; v.4 describes what God thinks of them. This turns Israel's pedigree and privileges into a liability to which they are not living up.

Motyer divides this section into five subdivisions: (1) Israel described: unreality – vv.1,2; (2) The former things: blessing for the unworthy – vv.3–6b; (3) The new things: the glory of God – vv.6c–11; (4) The all-controlling Lord – vv.12–16; (5) A problem solved; a problem raised – vv. 17–22.

**(1) Israel described: unreality – vv.1,2**

The use of the names Jacob, Israel and Judah, and Jerusalem do more than narrowing down the scope of the nation to one particular tribe; it traces a line of supposed spiritual development, which ought to have been but was not. Jacob, the deceiver became Israel, the prince of God, and Judah the tribe from which the man after God's own heart was born. It was the only tribe that lived at the place God had chosen to reveal Himself.

The Hebrew text reads literally “out of the waters of Judah” using the word *mayim*, which means “water,” as in the verse “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over *the waters*,”<sup>1</sup> but it can also mean “semen,” although it is never literally used as such in the Old Testament. *Barnes' Notes* comments: “This metaphor is taken from a fountain which sends forth its streams of water, and the idea is, that they owed their origin to Judah, as the streams flowed from a fountain. A similar figure is used by Balaam in describing the vast increase of the Jews: (Num 34) ‘He shall pour the waters out of his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters.’ ... The idea is, that Judah was the fountain, or origin of the people who were then exiled in Babylon. The ten tribes had revolted, and had been carried away, and the name of Benjamin had been absorbed in that of Judah, and this had become the common name of the nation. Perhaps Judah is mentioned here with honor as the fountain of the nation, because it was from him that the Messiah was to descend (Gen 49:10); and this mention of his name would serve to bring that promise to view, and would be an assurance that the nation would not be destroyed, nor the power finally depart until He should come.”

Judah demonstrated its status as guardian of things divine by taking oaths in the name of the LORD and invoking the God of Israel. But this apparent good attitude was a cover-up for a life of stubborn disobedience and persistent idolatry. Judah used its religion as a cloak to hide a life of sin and corruption. James' description of faith without works fits Judah to a nicety. The people had no heart of love for the God they proclaimed to serve. They observed a series of empty rituals which Jesus would compare to “whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.”<sup>2</sup> J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, clarifies: “The Hebrew of verse 2 has an introductory word (*ki*) omitted by NIV. It requires here the translation ‘though,’ thus exposing as hollow both of their claims, that of citizenship and that of personal faith.”

**(2) The former things: blessing for the unworthy – vv.3–6b**

The message of these verses is rather cryptic. Bible scholars have argued about the meaning of “the former things” in v.3 and the “new things” in v.6. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Two cycles of prophecy seem to be intended — one of comparatively ancient date, the other quite fresh — both equally showing forth the power of God and his infinite superiority to the idols. It is difficult to determine what the two cycles of prophecy are.” The people of Judah, to whom this was addressed, seem to have had the same problem of understanding, the reason being their stubborn disobedience. Their idolatry, being occupied with dead statues, had killed their spiritual understanding. We all acquire the features of the God or gods we serve.

The key to understanding this passage may be in observing, not what has been said, but who said it. Isaiah emphasized previously that God predicted the future and none of the idols communicated anything. Because of their persistent unwillingness to obey the Lord, this point had not made any impression on the

1. Gen. 1:2

2. Matt. 23:27

people of Judah. They acted as if God were silent and the idols communicated with them. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, remarks: “The argument Isaiah had earlier used to expose the deadness of idols is here used to expose the deadness of Israel! Distant prediction and sudden fulfillment both deprived them of a chance to give credit to their idols.”

Israel’s history proves that God had always been in control of future events. The exodus was not a spur-of-the-moment affair that happened unannounced. When God called Moses, He told him exactly what would happen. The same divine foreknowledge would determine the Babylonian captivity and Israel’s return to the Promised Land. All God asked of the people here is that they recognize this.

**(3) The new things: the glory of God – vv.6c–11**

The new things are not new to God but to the people. *The Pulpit Commentary* suggests: “On the whole, the language used seems most consonant with the view ... that the ‘new things’ are those about to be revealed in the next section of the prophecy (Isaiah 49-53), things belonging to the coming of Christ, and the ‘new creation’ which it will be the great object of his coming to bring about.” That view seems to be consistent with the message of Scripture as a whole. The Apostle Paul speaks of the mystery of the Gospel. In his *Epistle to the Ephesians*, he wrote: “In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, the incarnation was the best-kept secret in the whole history of salvation. The main reason for secrecy was obviously to keep the details from the enemy. That sounds like sound strategy in any warfare. Satan knew from God’s prophecy to Eve that one of her descendants would crush his head, but who and how was kept from him till it was too late for him to react. He may have thought that the crucifixion was his final victory, and Jesus’ subsequent resurrection must have come as a complete surprise to him.

If the devil himself could not understand the depth and details of God’s plan for the salvation of the world, the idol statues that he used to manipulate the human mind could even less! God invites His children to look into the past, to tune their ears to what He wants to whisper to them about the future.

Although the topic of revelation is not revealed in this prophecy, we know from history that the first fulfillment was in the destruction of Jerusalem, the captivity of Judah and the ultimate return. All these events, however, foreshadowed the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What took seventy years in Jewish Old Testament history would be accomplished in three days in the New Testament. After Jesus’ cleansing of the temple, we read: “Then the Jews demanded of him, ‘What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ The Jews replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?’ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said.”<sup>2</sup>

Even though “the new things” refer to a mystery that had remained hidden, Israel could have understood in essence what they meant. V.8 suggests that the reason for the people’s inability to grasp was that they refused to understand. Their ear had not been opened. The reference here may be to the law on the Hebrew slave, who legally was to be set free after seven years of service, but who chose to remain his master’s slave because he loved his master.<sup>3</sup> Israel had never obeyed God because it had never loved God. Jesus became the ultimate bond slave, fulfilling David’s prophecy in one of the Psalms: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced.”<sup>4</sup>

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1. Eph. 3:4-6

2. John 2:18-22

3. See Ex. 21:2-6.

4. Ps. 40:6

God calls Judah “treacherous,” *bagowd* in Hebrew. This is the only place in Isaiah where this word is used. Jeremiah uses the same word to describe Judah, calling her Israel’s “unfaithful sister Judah.”<sup>1</sup> The context there is idolatry, which God calls adultery. *Barnes’ Notes* comments about the phrase: “Well do I know how treacherous you are; you were called a rebel from birth: ‘I knew that, as a people, you are characteristically false and perfidious. This does not refer to their conduct toward other nations, but to their conduct toward God. They were false and unfaithful to him, and the sense is, that if God had not foretold the destruction of Babylon and their deliverance from it so clearly that there could have been no misunderstanding of it, and no perversion, they would have also perverted this, and ascribed it to something else than to him. Perhaps they might, as their forefathers did, when they came out of Egypt (Ex 32:4), have ascribed it to idols (compare Isa 48:5), and the result might have been a relapse into that very sin, to cure which was the design of removing them to Babylon.”

V.9 speaks of postponement, not of cancellation of judgment. God gives three reasons for this delay: His Name, His praise and the doom of the people. God’s Name and His praise are parallel. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah* comments: “His name is ... what he has revealed himself to be, and ‘Yahweh’ (Ex. 3:15) is not only the holy God visiting judgment (Ex. 12:12) but also the saving and redeeming God (Ex. 6:6–7; 12:13). His people play false to revelation, but he is always true to what he has revealed through his word. Secondly, there is *my praise*, the praise due to me (see 11). This is illustrated in Exodus 32:12 and Numbers 14:13–14 – the abandonment of rebellious Israel would expose the Lord’s character and power to misunderstanding.” Judgment has never been God’s intention with mankind and creation; it is the result of the entrance of sin and the stain it left on God’s holiness. And, as we observed before, proclamation of judgment is always an act of mercy. It is contingent on man’s repentance or the lack of it. The Apostle Peter complements Isaiah’s statement, saying: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”<sup>2</sup>

The phrase “See, I have refined you, though not as silver” has puzzled Bible scholars over the centuries. “Not as silver” is actually the wording of Jerome. *The Septuagint* reads: “Not on account of silver,” and, according to *Barnes’ Notes*, the eighteenth century Dutchman, Grotius, interprets it: “I have a long time tried thee by afflictions, but nothing good appears in thee;’ that is, I have not found you to be silver, or to be pure, as when a worker in metals applies the usual heat to a mass of ore for the purpose of separating the dross, and obtains no silver.” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “Not with the severity with which silver is refined (see ... Psalm 12:6). ... The furnace of affliction is here the Babylonian captivity. The object of the Captivity was to ‘test’ and ‘refine,’ or purify God’s people to a certain extent — not with extreme severity, but in such sort as to fit them to ‘bear his Name before the Gentiles’ for another five hundred years.” Malachi would pick up on the same theme and apply it to the coming of the Messiah. We read: “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.”<sup>3</sup>

The Apostle Paul shows the place and purpose of God’s refining fire in the life of God’s children. In his *Epistle to the Romans*, he writes: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the

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1. Jer. 3:7,10  
 2. II Peter 3:9  
 3. Mal. 3:2-4

Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”<sup>1</sup> Oswald Chambers, in *My Utmost for His Highest*, states that one can always recognize the person who has gone through the fires of sorrow.

Speaking about God’s grace, the Apostle Peter writes: “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”<sup>2</sup> And: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”<sup>3</sup> No one was tested more severely in the crucible of sorrow than He who does the refining of our life, our Lord Jesus Christ. That is why the author of Hebrews can say: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”<sup>4</sup>

The reason God went to so much trouble for Israel was not primarily for their sake, but for His own. When sin entered the universe in the fall of Satan, God’s glory was affected and compromised. We see this symbolically acted out in the ceremonial cleansing of the tabernacle and its furniture. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to apply the blood of the sacrifice to the objects in the tabernacle. We read: “Then he shall come out to the altar that is before the LORD and make atonement for it. He shall take some of the bull’s blood and some of the goat’s blood and put it on all the horns of the altar. He shall sprinkle some of the blood on it with his finger seven times to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites. When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat.”<sup>5</sup>

That is why God asks: “How can I let myself be defamed?” The Hebrew verb rendered “defamed” is *chahal*, which has the primary meaning of “to bore.” From there it became to mean: “to wound,” “to profane.” The word is related to a word that means “a flute.” The idea seems to be to whistle at someone in a mocking manner. Jesus may have had this in mind when He said: “To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’”<sup>6</sup> Israel’s idolatry would make a mockery of God’s glory. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, believes that it refers to Israel’s return from captivity. He writes: “If Israel’s sinfulness defeats the Lord’s purposes, then sin gets glory over him; if the people remain in exile, then the gods of Babylon triumph. But neither the forces of history (Babylon) nor the power of sin will win the day.”

“I will not yield my glory to another” is a repetition of an earlier statement: “I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, God intends to share His glory with us. When Isaiah saw God in his vision, the seraphs were singing: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”<sup>8</sup> Glory is the essence of God’s being; it is the physical expression of His holiness. The Apostle Paul defines sin as falling short of the glory of God.<sup>9</sup> Jesus leads us

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1. Rom. 5:1-5
  2. I Peter 1:6,7
  3. I Peter 4:12,13
  4. Heb. 4:14-16
  5. Lev. 16:18-20
  6. Matt. 11:16,17
  7. Isa. 42:8
  8. Isa. 6:3
  9. Rom. 3:23

to glory.<sup>1</sup> And we read about the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, “It shone with the glory of God.”<sup>2</sup> God will not share His glory with idols or with His adversary, Satan, but He does share it with us.

**(4) The all-controlling Lord – vv.12–16**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section, saying: “Verse 12a repeats 1 and indicates that we are now entering the second half of the poem. The repeated calls to *listen* (12a, 14a, 16a) mark the divisions of this section: the Lord controls the whole universe (12–13), he controls history, bringing on to the scene the one he has chosen to fulfill his purpose (14–15), and he controls the advent of his Servant endowed for his task (16).”

To the generation that would be in Babylonian captivity, God says that He will deliver them. “I am the first and I am the last” is also a repetition of what was said earlier: “This is what the LORD says — Israel’s King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.”<sup>3</sup> The Apostle John uses Isaiah’s words as a description of God, using the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. “ ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.’ ”<sup>4</sup>

God places His plan for the deliverance of the captives against the cosmic background of creation as a whole, as if to say that this is what He had in mind when He created. The return of the few thousand Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem hardly made a ripple in world history, yet it was part of God’s overall grand plan of salvation. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments here: “Jehovah invites Israel to recognize his sovereign wisdom in using a heathen instrument to deliver them. As eternal Creator, God is the Lord of human history and brings to pass amazing providences beyond all human surmise or ability to predict. It was indeed a marvel that God should call Israel’s deliverer, Cyrus, by name 150 years before he was born, and love him as His chosen instrument to smite Babylon and destroy her power. But an even greater wonder is the fact that from the beginning of the human race, God the Son, the ‘angel of the Lord’ (of the OT) and the ‘Word’ or Logos (of the NT) has time and again clearly spoken to God’s covenant children and revealed the divine will and plan for the future. In verse 16 the preincarnate Christ identifies himself as the one sent by the Father and the Spirit to convey God’s prophetic message to the inspired prophet.”

As J. Alec Motyer observes, in v.14 the focus changes from creation to history. God calls Israel together to listen and come to the realization that God is in charge of history. *The New International Version* reads v.14: “Which of [the idols] has foretold these things?” The Hebrew has neither “the idols,” which is indicated by the brackets, nor “things.” Again, the problem with this kind of argument is that predictions of the future can only be verified when the future has become the past. We can only conclude from this that the people God addresses here are not the ones who heard Isaiah’s voice, but generations not yet born. This concurs with Paul’s interpretation of Old Testament history. The Apostle wrote to the Corinthians: “Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.”<sup>5</sup> The author of Hebrew takes this even one step further, saying: “None of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”<sup>6</sup>

The “chosen ally” is obviously Cyrus, the instrument of God to achieve His purpose with Babylon. The Hebrew text reads literally: “The LORD has loved him: he will do His pleasure.” The Hebrew word used is *‘ahab*, “to have affection for.” It is used in The Song of Solomon to describe love: “Tell me, *you*

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1. Heb. 2:10
  2. Rev. 21:11
  3. Isa. 44:6
  4. Rev. 1:8; 22:13
  5. I Cor. 10:6,11
  6. Heb. 11:39,40

whom I love, where you graze your flock and where you rest your sheep at midday. Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends?"<sup>1</sup> We also find it in the verses: "'I have loved you,' says the LORD. 'But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' 'Was not Esau Jacob's brother?' the LORD says. 'Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.'"<sup>2</sup> The intensity of emotion contained in *'ahab* suggests that God looks beyond Cyrus to the Messiah, the real man after His own heart, who would carry out His purpose.

Bible scholars disagree about who the person is that is introduced in v.16. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* quotes Origin, who wrote: "Who is it that saith in Isaiah, And now the Lord hath sent me and his Spirit? in which, as the expression is ambiguous, is it the Father and the Holy Spirit who have sent Jesus; or the Father, who hath sent both Christ and the Holy Spirit. The latter is the true interpretation." *Barnes' Notes* states: "Grotius renders it, 'The Lord by his Spirit has given me these commands.' Jerome understands the word 'Spirit' as in the nominative case, and as meaning that the Spirit united with Yahweh in sending the person referred to."

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, disagreeing with Barnes, observes: "The prophet here speaks, claiming attention to his announcement as to Cyrus, on the ground of his mission from God and His Spirit. But he speaks not in his own person so much as in that of Messiah, to whom alone, in the fullest sense, the words apply (Isa 61:1; John 10:36). Plainly, Isa 49:1, which is the continuation of Isa 48 from Isa 48:16, where the change of speaker from God (Isa 48:1,12-15) begins, is the language of Messiah. Luke 4:1,14,18, shows that the Spirit combined with the Father in sending the Son: therefore 'His Spirit' is therefore nominative to 'sent,' not accusative, following it. Not as Barnes, 'The Lord God hath sent me, and His Spirit.' The Vulgate, and seemingly the Septuagint, Chaldaic, Arabic, and Syriac support the English version. As Messiah came forth, sent by God the Father and the Spirit, so the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father in the name of the Son (John 14:26)."

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, adds to this: "Once more the word of God is the initial and initiating factor, now seen in the sending of an unnamed speaker. We are told, however, that he is sent by *the Sovereign LORD (Adonay Yahweh)* and (endowed) with his Spirit. The only Spirit-endowed person in these chapters is the Servant (42:1), and in the immediate context the divine designation 'Lord Yahweh' occurs in the third Servant Song as endowing (50:4), directing (50:5) and helping (50:7) the Servant. In addition, when the Servant reappears in chapters 56 – 66 as the Conqueror, 61:1 opens with *the Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me*. We can hardly question, then, that the present verse is an interjection by the Servant of the Lord as the Agent of the 'new things' announced in the matching verses 3–6b. The balance of the passage is a striking illustration of the way structure aids interpretation: former things (3–6b), new things (6c–7); Cyrus (14–15), the Servant (16). While the interjection does, of course, take us by surprise, it is far from inappropriate that the servant should step from the shadows like this. First, it suits what has immediately preceded. The Lord is the sovereign ruler of creation (13); his rule of the flow of history is signally seen in Cyrus (14–15); but the Servant, as revealed by Isaiah, is the climax to which all history is leading. Secondly, it is appropriate to what follows: with 48:20–21 the significance of Cyrus has ended. But, for the problem raised by verse 22, the Servant is the appointed answer. As the one actor leaves the stage, the other quietly reveals his presence."

**(5) A problem solved; a problem raised – vv. 17–22.**

In v.17 God reveals Himself again as the LORD, the Redeemer, (the *ga'al*), the Holy One of Israel. The *ga'al* or *Goel* is the next-of-kin who has the right to redeem by buying back the relative sold in slavery. God's revelation of Himself with this triple designation shows us to fullness of His glory. The LORD, Yahweh, is the God of the covenant. That is the way God revealed Himself to Moses when He intended to deliver Israel from its slavery in Egypt. As the Redeemer, He paid the price with His own blood, and as the Holy One of Israel, He is enthroned above creation. All this is revealed in this chapter in the context of the

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1. Song 1:7
  2. Mal. 1:2,3

Babylonian captivity. But we understand that Babylon is symbolic of all ages in which the call issued in v.20 rings through all of Scripture.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “The thought of *peace* enfolds these verses, the peace that might have been (17–19) and the peace that cannot be (22). In between these is the great exit from Babylon (20) and the exodus-like journey home (21). The political solution – the people home from Babylon – does not recover the *peace* that might have been. It was the sin of disobedience (18) that forfeited peace, and until wickedness has been dealt with peace must remain unrealized.”

About the subject of God as redeemer, Motyer continues: “As their Next-of-Kin the Lord has taken on himself their need of liberation. His almighty power has directed history in the rousing of Cyrus, the conqueror-liberator. *The Holy One of Israel*: in chapters 40 – 55 Isaiah calls the Lord ‘Redeemer’ ten times, and in six of these he links the Lord’s next-of-kinship, as here, with the title *the Holy One of Israel* (41:14; 43:14; 47:4; 49:7; 54:5). That the Holy One should draw near as the Next-of-Kin is a truly overwhelming display of grace and condescension, but it raises in a crucial form the problem not only of unworthiness but of sin. Can the Next-of-Kin shoulder this problem also? Surely it is for this reason that Isaiah so insists on holding the two concepts together. Whatever help he brings to his people (41:8), whatever rescue he effects (43:14), whatever victory he wins (47:4) – whatever burden he takes from them and loads on to himself – he remains the Holy One. Sooner or later the disparity between his holiness and their unworthy sinfulness much be taken into account. In this way Isaiah prepares for the stark announcement in verse 22 and for the ensuing spiritual redemption through the Servant.”

The Hebrew text of v.17 reads literally: “Thus says the LORD, your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you by the way that you should go.” The word, rendered “to profit” is *ya`al*, which means “to ascend,” or “to be valuable.” *The Living Bible* paraphrases this: “The Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, says, ‘I am the Lord your God, who punishes you for your own good and leads you along the paths that you should follow.’ ”

God’s plan for Israel was a peace plan, which Israel rejected. The imagery is beautiful. Isaiah sees himself at the seashore, where a large river empties itself into the sea. The river and the waves represent Israel’s peace and the sand on the beach the multitude that is meant to enjoy that peace. But the painting is torn to threads by human disobedience. Instead of turning west toward the water, they went east into the desert.

Obedience and peace are always linked together as are righteousness and peace. Just before leaving this earth, Jesus said to His disciples: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”<sup>1</sup> Sin robs us of peace. As v.22 states: “There is no peace for the wicked.”

Vv.20-22 speaks about much more than Israel’s return from Babylonian captivity. When Israel left Egypt, she took Egypt with her. The people who had been slaves for centuries kept their slave-mentality when they were set free. The same danger would threaten those who were born in Babylon and who grew up there. God warns them to leave Babylon behind and not to take it with them as they return to the place of His rest. He wants them to remember their history and learn from it.

“Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians!” is a cry that is heard throughout all of Scripture. Jeremiah cried: “Flee out of Babylon; leave the land of the Babylonians, and be like the goats that lead the flock.”<sup>2</sup> And: “Flee from Babylon! Run for your lives! Do not be destroyed because of her sins. It is time for the LORD’s vengeance; he will pay her what she deserves.”<sup>3</sup> Zechariah also said: “Come, O Zion! Escape, you who live in the Daughter of Babylon!”<sup>4</sup> And John, in *Revelation* reports: “Then I heard another voice

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1. John 14:23, 27  
 2. Jer. 50:8  
 3. Jer. 51:6  
 4. Zech. 2:7

from heaven say: ‘Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

V.21 links deliverance from Babylon to the exodus from Egypt. The Apostle Paul wants us to draw a spiritual lesson from this. In his *Epistle to the Corinthians*, he writes: “For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry.’ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did — and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did — and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did — and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”<sup>2</sup>

What Paul is saying is that we are all on our way from Egypt to the Promised Land and that we must all rid ourselves of the spirit of Egypt and Babylon, however strong the pull to our old life may be. God will allow temptations on the road, but we are under no obligation to yield to them. If we keep our eyes on the goal, if we keep ourselves well fed and slaked in our fellowship with Christ, the enemy will have no grip on us. With God there will be plenty of water in the barrenness of the life we travel through. That assurance will give us the peace that wickedness would withhold from us.

#### THE GREATER DELIVERANCE: THE WORK OF THE SERVANT (49 – 55)

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, divides this section into 5 subdivisions: a. The Servant’s double task (49:1–6), b. Divine confirmation: worldwide success (49:7–13), c. Nation and Servant, a contrast: unresponding and responding (49:14 – 50:11), d. Salvation in prospect: the watching remnant (51: - 52:12), e. Worldwide salvation (52:13 – 55:13). These subdivisions are also split up in sections we will copy as we get to them.

##### a. The Servant’s double task (49:1–6)

Motyer introduces this section with: “The emphasis on the sinfulness of Israel (48:1–8), the unexpected interjection from the Servant (48:16), and the assertion that the people have come back from Babylon but still need to be brought back to the Lord (48:22), prepare us for chapters 49 – 55, the redeeming work of the Servant. He is given a double task relating to Israel and to the world (49:5–6), and when he has performed the great work of sin-bearing (52:13 – 53:12) the call goes out to Zion (54:1ff.) and the world (55:1ff.) to enter gladly and freely into what he has done.”

The same *Commentary* continues: “Isaiah 49:1–6, the second Servant Song, has the same relationship to 48:1–22 as the first Servant Song (42:1–4) has to what precedes it. There, the mounting awareness of Gentile need (41:21–29) was answered by the announcement that the Lord had a Servant at the ready who would bring justice – divine revelation – to the helpless and hopeless world (42:1, 3–4). Following this a new factor entered the equation. Israel, the ‘official’ servant of the Lord (41:8), bound, blind and sinful (42:18–25), was unfit for the task, and Isaiah’s awareness of Israel’s need came to dominate his presentation, reaching its climax in 48:1ff. This is the cue for the Servant once more to occupy center

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1. Rev. 18:4

2. I Cor. 10:1-13

stage as he testifies to his prior call to *bring Jacob back to him ... to bring back ... Israel* (49:5–6) while also bringing *salvation to the ends of the earth* (49:6). The Servant’s job description has been rewritten: he is still committed to the whole world as in 42:1–4, but now, conforming to the development in 42:18 – 48:22, he has a prior task in relation to Israel His testimony falls into two parts.”

- i. The first testimony: Israel as it was meant to be (49:1–3)

***1 Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name.***

***2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver.***

***3 He said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."***

The person speaking is a single individual, but he calls himself with the name of a nation: Israel. The suggestion is that this person, obviously, the Messiah, is representing the whole nation of Israel and does what Israel was supposed to do but failed to do. He is the King and Priest, as Israel was called to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>1</sup>

The first thing that strikes us is that this prophecy is addressed to the whole world: the islands and distant nations. This message is for the whole world to hear. It is the prophecy about Christ’s Great Commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”<sup>2</sup>

This authority is revealed in the incarnation of the Word of God, about which the Apostle John says: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”<sup>3</sup>

The prophecy that the Messiah’s name would be given before His birth was fulfilled when the angel announced His coming to Mary, His mother: “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.”<sup>4</sup> When the Word of God speaks the Word of God, it is, in the words of *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, “living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”<sup>5</sup> In Revelation, the Apostle John sees the Word of God coming out of Jesus’ mouth as “a sharp double-edged sword.”<sup>6</sup>

The phrase “in the shadow of his hand he hid me” is interpreted differently by different Bible scholars. It stands between the images of the sword and the arrow and, obviously, speaks of some kind of protection. *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “Many have understood it as meaning that the shadow of the hand of God would cover or defend him-as a shade or shadow protects from heat.” The words remind us of the powerful statement in the Psalm: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.”<sup>7</sup> The Psalmist explains this protection: “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at

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1. See Ex. 19:6.
  2. Matt. 28:18-20
  3. John 1:1-5,14
  4. Luke 1:31,32
  5. Heb. 4:12
  6. Rev. 1:16

your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.”<sup>1</sup> This protection is the result of the Messiah’s resting in the shadow of the Almighty, meaning that it is not His activity but the power of God that allows Him to do what He has been sent to do. Jesus expressed this Himself by saying: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” And: “The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.”<sup>2</sup>

God’s protection over His Son was not just from the Jewish priests and scribes, but from Satan himself. In His battle against the real enemy, Jesus did not lean upon His own human understanding, however perfect He was. The sword and arrow He used were the Word of God.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states about the two kinds of weapons mentioned: “The contrast between the *sword* for close encounters and the *arrow* for distant attack implies that the Servant is equipped for every contest.”

In v.4 the Messiah is given the name Israel. Actually, Bible scholars have argued about the meaning of “Israel” in this section. Some even believe that the name should not be in it; others maintain that it refers to Isaiah or to the nation of Israel as a whole. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes about this: “Israel was the name of an individual before it became that of a nation, and with the name came responsibility for the Abrahamic promises of world blessing (Gn. 28:13–14; 35:9–15). The whole weight rested on the shoulders of one individual. Isaiah now brings that responsibility full circle. He has discerned that the nation-servant is unfit (42:18–25) – indeed, so unfit that it can no longer claim the name (48:1–2). So, must the Lord admit defeat? No, he has prepared a worthy Israel! – the Servant divinely shaped for the task and, as we shall soon discover (49:14 – 50:11), the only one worthy of the name.”

The Hebrew text of v.4 reads literally: “And said to me, you are my servant, o Israel in whom I will be glorified.” Isaiah uses the Hebrew word *pa’ar* 9 times throughout his book, sometimes in the sense of “to boast,” as in “Does the ax *raise itself above* him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it?”<sup>3</sup> But more often in the sense of “being glorified,” as in “Sing for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done this; shout aloud, O earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the LORD has redeemed Jacob, he *displays his glory* in Israel.”<sup>4</sup> The Apostle John applies this glory to Jesus, saying: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”<sup>5</sup> The Father gave this testimony to the Son during His transfiguration. We read: “While [Peter] was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’ ”<sup>6</sup>

- ii. The second testimony: the Agent, the task and the result (49:4–6)

***4 But I said, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God."***

***5 And now the LORD says — he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength***

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7. Ps. 91:1

1. Ps. 91:7,8

2. John 5:19; 14:10

3. Isa. 10:15

4. Isa. 44:23

5. John 1:14

6. Matt. 17:5

***6 he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."***

God allowed Isaiah a glance into the mind of the Messiah, showing him the emotional reactions the Son of God would experience as a human being on earth. The purpose of this revelation must have been, at least partially, to boost Isaiah's own faith and perseverance in the ups-and-downs of his own life as a servant of God. It must have encouraged Isaiah, as it must every servant of the Lord, to see how Jesus Christ would face hardship and disappointments and overcome them. When Jesus faced the disappointment of being misunderstood and rejected, we read: "At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'"<sup>1</sup> If Jesus' ministry as a teacher and prophet was not, humanly speaking, successful, why should we be discouraged if ours isn't?

At this point, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, asks the question: "If the servant is to be identified with Jesus Christ, we cannot but ask where, in him, do we find this darkness? Gethsemane does not suit, for there the darkness sprang from the impending future. But throughout the Gospels Jesus faced rejection, unbelief, prejudice and misunderstanding. He cried out, 'how long ...?' (Lk. 9:41), was grieved by his disciples' failure to understand (Mk. 8:21), and foresaw the falling away of the core group (Mk. 14:27). Perhaps what is thus diffused throughout Jesus' ministry is, so to speak, compressed by Isaiah into this single utterance."

God promises to those He has called that He will display His glory in them. He tells them that their conception and birth is part of His blueprint for their lives. That, if human honor and recognition is not given, the honor that counts, the honor God gives, will be given. That "we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."<sup>2</sup> That the return of Israel from Babylonian captivity is only a fragment of God's eternal plan to evangelize the whole world.

The phrase "to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself" has been another topic of controversy among Bible scholars. *Barnes' Notes* observes: "This metaphor is taken from a scattered flock which a shepherd endeavors to gather, or collect to himself. There is great variety in the interpretation of this expression" and then *Barnes* gives several different readings of the text. *The Commentary* continues: "It is impossible to determine the true reading; and the only guide is the context, and the views which shall be entertained of the design of the passage. To me it seems that the parallelism demands that we should adopt the reading ... that he had been appointed to gather in the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and gave his life to it. Other parts of this statement (Isa 49:4-6) show, that by them he was rejected, and that then salvation was sent to other parts of the world."

The second part of v.4 reads literally in Hebrew: "Yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God." The Hebrew word, translated "work" is *pe`ullah*, which can mean either labor," or "wages." We find it in the verse: "Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight."<sup>3</sup>

The intent of the phrase seems to be that it is not to the servant to evaluate how successful his work for God is. The Apostle Paul applied this principle to himself, according to what he wrote to the Corinthians: "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent."<sup>4</sup> God rarely shows us the impact our life has upon other people. Our responsibility is not in evaluation, but in being faithful to Him who has given us our task.

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1. Matt. 11:25-27
  2. See II Cor 4:7.
  3. Lev. 19:13
  4. I Cor. 4:3,4

The voice in v.5 continues to be the Servant's, that is the Messiah, the Son, but in v.6 it is the Father who speaks. The second part of v.5 reads literally in Hebrew: "I shall yet be glorified in the eyes of the LORD." The Hebrew word, rendered "honored," or "glorified" is *kabad*, which carries the sense of "to be heavy." We find it in Paul's statement: "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."<sup>1</sup> It is the glory of the Lord that gives us weight or substance. Sin and wickedness rob us of this weight. That is why the Psalmist says: "Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away."<sup>2</sup> Intimacy with God will give us the weight, or substance, we need to stand in His presence. It helps us to build up spiritual muscle to do the work assigned to us. As the Messiah confessed: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does,"<sup>3</sup> so we are told: "If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."<sup>4</sup>

The salvation of the world is closely related to the salvation of the tribes of Israel. The Messiah's primary task has always been "to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel [God has] kept." According to the Apostle Paul's analysis, Israel's rejection of the Messiah opened the door for the Gentile world to hear and accept the Gospel. And when Israel will be brought back, God's plan of salvation will have come full circle. He wrote in his *Epistle to the Romans*: "For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved."<sup>5</sup>

b. Divine confirmation: worldwide success (49:7–13)

**7 This is what the LORD says — the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel — to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: "Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."**

**8 This is what the LORD says: "In the time of my favor I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people, to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances,**

**9 to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!' "They will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill.**

**10 They will neither hunger nor thirst, nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them. He who has compassion on them will guide them and lead them beside springs of water.**

**11 I will turn all my mountains into roads, and my highways will be raised up.**

**12 See, they will come from afar — some from the north, some from the west, some from the region of Aswan."**

**13 Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: "The first Servant Song (42:1–4) set a pattern which each in turn repeats – the addition of a confirmatory 'tailpiece' (see 42:5–9): here, his significance for the whole world is divinely confirmed as the Lord forecasts Gentile submission to the Servant (7), balancing this with a *covenant* for a restored Israel (8); Israel's exodus journey home (9–10) is

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1. II Cor. 4:17 (*New King James Version*)
  2. Ps. 1:4
  3. John 5:19
  4. John 15:5
  5. Rom. 11:15,25,26

then balanced by a worldwide ingathering (11–12) and the call to universal praise (13). What the Servant is called to do (1–6) is guaranteed by the divine word (7–13).”

V.7 reads literally in Hebrew: “Thus says the LORD, the redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, to whom man despises, to him whom the nation abhors...” The Hebrew verb, rendered “despise” is *bazoh*, which means: “scorned.” This is the only place in Scripture where this word is found. The word *ta`ab*, “to loathe,” or “detest,” is unique to Isaiah, although it is used elsewhere in Scripture. It stands for something abominable. For instance, speaking about idol statues, the Lord said to Israel: “Do not bring a *detestable* thing into your house or you, like it, will be set apart for destruction. Utterly abhor and detest it, for it is set apart for destruction.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the first instance in *Isaiah*, where reference is made to our Lord’s suffering and crucifixion. We are given here a condensed preview of what will be elaborated on in later chapters.<sup>2</sup> “Despised and abhorred” depicts what Israel felt about its Messiah when they called for His crucifixion. Isaiah also gives us a condensation of Paul’s description of Jesus’ obedience and rehabilitation: “[Jesus] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>3</sup>

On the phrase “to the servant of rulers” *Barnes’ Notes* comments: “This probably means that the Messiah voluntarily submitted himself to human power, and yielded obedience to human rulers. The idea, if interpreted by the facts as recorded in the New Testament, is, that though he was the ruler of all worlds, yet he voluntarily became subject to human laws, and yielded submission and obedience to human rulers. For this purpose he conformed to the existing institutions of his country at the time when he lived; he paid the customary tax or tribute that was laid for the support of religion (Matt 17:27); he submitted to a trial before the Sanhedrim, and before Pilate, though both were conducted in a manner that violated all the principles of justice; and he submitted to the unjust decree which condemned him to die. He was, therefore, all his life, subject to rulers. He was not only exemplary and strict in obeying the laws of the land; but he became, in a more strict sense, their servant, as he was deprived of his liberty, comfort, and life at their caprice. He refrained himself from exerting his divine power, and voluntarily became subject to the will of others.”

Again, the Apostle Paul provides us with the background against which the submission of all human authority to the authority of Christ will occur. In the context of the resurrection of Christ, Paul states: “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he ‘has put everything under his feet.’ Now when it says that ‘everything’ has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.”<sup>4</sup>

In the phrase “Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down” it is difficult to determine whether “rise up” and “bow down” are part of the same act of worship or whether they are opposites. The Hebrew word *quwm*, “to rise” simply means: “to get up,” without indication of intent. We find it in the verse: “Now Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let’s go out to the field.’ And while they were in the field, Cain *attacked* his brother Abel and killed him,”<sup>5</sup> and also in: “Go, walk through the length and

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1. Deut. 7:26
  2. See Chapters 52 and 53.
  3. Phil. 2:7-11
  4. I Cor. 15:24-28
  5. Gen. 4:8

breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”<sup>1</sup> We can interpret the words to mean that the risen Christ will put down all uprising against God’s rule, or that the kings will voluntarily surrender their throne to the Messiah’s authority.

The Hebrew word rendered “bow down,” *shachah*, usually describes an act of worship, as in the verse: “When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he *worshiped* God. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, ‘Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands.’ ”<sup>2</sup>

V.8 is clearly addressed to the Messiah, but the Apostle Paul, in quoting this verse, applies it to us, New Testament believers. We read: “For he says, ‘In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.’ I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.”<sup>3</sup> The Apostle indicates that what pertains to Christ, pertains to us also.

In the context of this section, the word “favor” may mean nothing more than “the right time.” But the Hebrew word *ratsown* is derived from a word that means, “delight.” In *Exodus* it is sometimes linked to the forgiveness of sin. We find it in connection with the description of the clothing of the high priest: “Make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it as on a seal: HOLY TO THE LORD. Fasten a blue cord to it to attach it to the turban; it is to be on the front of the turban. It will be on Aaron’s forehead, and he will bear the guilt involved in the sacred gifts the Israelites consecrate, whatever their gifts may be. It will be on Aaron’s forehead continually so that they will be *acceptable* to the LORD.”<sup>4</sup> And in *Leviticus* it is sometimes connected to the sacrifice, as in: “If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be *acceptable* to the LORD.”<sup>5</sup>

The topic of this verse is what the author of *Hebrews* calls “the eternal covenant.” We read: “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”<sup>6</sup> Before the creation of time, there must have been, in eternity, an agreement between the Father and the Son in which the Son promised the Father to become a created being and give His body as an atonement for the sin of mankind. The Father, in turn, committed Himself to bring His Son back to life in the first resurrection from the dead. That is “the time of my favor,” and “the day of salvation.” It is also the day of our salvation when God reveals His grace to us.

In fulfilling the terms of the eternal covenant, the Messiah becomes the covenant Himself. That is why Jesus could say: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>7</sup> The restoration of the land and the return from captivity, although literal and physical events, become symbols of a spiritual reality. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “Isaiah sees the future in terms which come naturally to him. In the light of John 18:36 and Acts 15:15–18 we see that land, restoration, captives and darkness are all figurative of spiritual blessings.” These Scripture references read respectively: “Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place,’ ”<sup>8</sup> and: “The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore

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1. Gen. 13:17
  2. Judg. 7:15
  3. II Cor. 6:2
  4. Ex. 28:36-38
  5. Lev. 1:3
  6. Heb. 13:20,21
  7. John 14:6
  8. John 18:36

it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name,' says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages.' ”<sup>1</sup>

V.9 reads literally in Hebrew: “That you may say to the prisoners, Go forth, and to them that [are] in darkness, Show yourselves.” The words are identical to an earlier statement in Isaiah: “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament elaborates on this theme of deliverance from imprisonment and darkness as being delivered from the influence of spiritual powers of darkness. Jesus says: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”<sup>3</sup> And: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”<sup>4</sup> The Apostle Paul writes: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.”<sup>5</sup> And: “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>6</sup> And the Apostle Peter states: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”<sup>7</sup>

*The New International Version* emphasizes the command that sets us free. It is given as an imperative. This means that we are under obligation to obey. Our part in deliverance is not passive, but active. But the Word of God is also creative; it calls into being what it orders.

The second part of v.9 and the following verses depict those who are freed as sheep, grazing beside the road, being fed as they go. The scene reminds us of David’s picture in Psalm Twenty-Three. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on this: “As the exodus from Egypt led to a journey under God’s care, so in this journey of the heart back to the Lord there is provision (9cd), with pasturage *beside the roads*, i.e. readily available, and the *barren* becomes fertile; protection (10ab) from the inner weakness of *hunger* and *thirst* and the outward threat of *heat* and sun (*heat* translates *sharab*, which may possibly mean ‘mirage’ – in context, the threat of disappointment); and *guardianship* (10cd), as the journey is under divine superintendence. The Lord has taken the people to his heart in *compassion* (*racham*, a love that is both maternal [1 Ki. 3:26] and paternal [Ps. 103:13], under his care (*guide ... lead*), and into his bounty (*springs of water*).” The Scripture references read respectively: “The woman whose son was alive was filled with compassion for her son and said to the king, ‘Please, my lord, give her the living baby! Don’t kill him!’ But the other said, ‘Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!’ ” and “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.”

Besides providing for the physical needs of those returning to the Promised Land, the Messiah also prepares the way along which the freed captives must travel. Mountains are correctly considered obstacles to travel. In some cases mountains illustrate spiritual resistance to God’s plan of salvation. In connection with the rebuilding of the temple, the prophet Zechariah says: “So [God] said to me, ‘This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of ‘God bless it! God bless it!’ ”<sup>8</sup> *The New International Version* states in a footnote:

1. Acts 15:15-18
2. Isa. 42:6,7
3. John 8:12
4. John 8:31,32
5. Eph. 5:8
6. Col. 1:13,14
7. I Peter 2:9
8. Zech. 4:6,7

“What are you” can be read as “Who are you.” Jesus may also have had demonic resistance in mind, more than rock, when He said to His disciples: “I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”<sup>1</sup>

When John the Baptist began to preach repentance, he partly quoted Isaiah’s words: “A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.’ ”<sup>2</sup> John said about himself “I am the voice of one calling in the desert.” We read: “Now this was John’s testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, ‘I am not the Christ.’ They asked him, ‘Then who are you? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ Finally they said, ‘Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘ ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’ ’ ”<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the ages, Bible scholars have voiced different opinions about the name Aswan in v.12. The Hebrew text has the word *Ciyiniym*, which some believe to be China. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states that even the rendering “Aswan” “is only a guess.” *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “It is highly improbable that an ethnic name which was not known to the Greeks till the time of Ptolemy (A.D. 120) should have recoiled Palestine by B.C. 700. And if ‘the sea’ means ‘the south’ in the preceding clause, the Sinim may be those of Phoenicia (...Genesis 10:17), who were among the furthest inhabitants of Asia towards the west. In any case, the reference is, not to the dispersed Jews, but to the remote Gentiles, who would pass from all quarters into the kingdom of the Redeemer.” *Barnes’ Notes* has a lengthy comment on the subject in which he considers China to be a viable option. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: “To the strong nucleus of the first Jewish Christians in Palestine there would be added converts from all the Gentiles, even from so remote a region as China (the most probable identification of Sinim, v. 12, although Elam and Syene have also been suggested).”

Isaiah projects his exuberant joy about the return of his people from captivity upon the whole of nature around him: heaven, earth and mountains. This is a poetical style often used in the Psalms. We read, for instance: “The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness.”<sup>4</sup> “Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.”<sup>5</sup> “Why gaze in envy, O rugged mountains, at the mountain where God chooses to reign, where the LORD himself will dwell forever?”<sup>6</sup> And: “When Israel came out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue, Judah became God’s sanctuary, Israel his dominion. The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back; the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. Why was it, O sea, that you fled, O Jordan, that you turned back, you mountains, that you skipped like rams, you hills, like lambs? Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turned the rock into a pool, the hard rock into springs of water.”<sup>7</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, suggests: “Mountains are perhaps singled out as places from which good tidings were shouted (40:9), or possibly as typical of the solid earth itself, once corrupted by human sin and

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1. Matt. 17:20
  2. Isa. 40:3,4
  3. John 1:19-23
  4. Ps. 72:3
  5. Ps. 98:8,9
  6. Ps. 68:16
  7. Ps 114:1-8

now liberated in the liberation of the children of God (Rom 8:20–21).” It could also be that nature takes over when human beings leave off, as Jesus suggested at His triumphant entrance in Jerusalem. We read: “When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!’ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, rebuke your disciples!’ I tell you,’ he replied, ‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.’ ”<sup>1</sup>

c. Nation and Servant, a contrast: unresponding and responding (49:14 – 50:11)

*14 But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me."*

*15 "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!*

*16 See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.*

*17 Your sons hasten back, and those who laid you waste depart from you.*

*18 Lift up your eyes and look around; all your sons gather and come to you. As surely as I live," declares the LORD, "you will wear them all as ornaments; you will put them on, like a bride.*

*19 "Though you were ruined and made desolate and your land laid waste, now you will be too small for your people, and those who devoured you will be far away.*

*20 The children born during your bereavement will yet say in your hearing, ‘This place is too small for us; give us more space to live in.’*

*21 Then you will say in your heart, ‘Who bore me these? I was bereaved and barren; I was exiled and rejected. Who brought these up? I was left all alone, but these — where have they come from?’”*

*22 This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "See, I will beckon to the Gentiles, I will lift up my banner to the peoples; they will bring your sons in their arms and carry your daughters on their shoulders.*

*23 Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground; they will lick the dust at your feet. Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who hope in me will not be disappointed."*

*24 Can plunder be taken from warriors, or captives rescued from the fierce?*

*25 But this is what the LORD says: "Yes, captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save.*

*26 I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh; they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine. Then all mankind will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob."*

*Chapter 50:1 This is what the LORD says: "Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you? Because of your sins you were sold; because of your transgressions your mother was sent away.*

*2 When I came, why was there no one? When I called, why was there no one to answer? Was my arm too short to ransom you? Do I lack the strength to rescue you? By a mere rebuke I dry up the sea, I turn rivers into a desert; their fish rot for lack of water and die of thirst.*

*3 I clothe the sky with darkness and make sackcloth its covering."*

*4 The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.*

*5 The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back.*

*6 I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.*

*7 Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.*

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1. Luke 19:37-40

**8 He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me!**

**9 It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up.**

**10 Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.**

**11 But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment.**

By way of introduction of this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “The voice of complaint (14) is a tragic anticlimax after the exuberance of 13, but it sets the tone for the next stage in Isaiah’s argument. Ruined, broken Zion, desolate after its long years of emptiness, offers an apt picture of the people themselves – just as we met them in 40:27; 45:9–11; 46:8–12, despondent, defeatist and grumbling. But while they prefer their misery to the Lord’s promises (29:14 – 50:3), the Servant again speaks in responsive, trustful obedience (50:4–9). In 42:18–25 Israel’s unworthiness unfitted it to be the Lord’s Servant; now the Servant’s contrasting worthiness qualifies him for the office. On the one hand, Zion is offered inducements to trust (49:14–26) but will not; on the other hand the Servant is forewarned of suffering to come (50:5, 6) yet responds with commitment. The contrast between the Servant who is Israel (49:3) and Zion who used to be Israel (48:1–2) is striking. Yet the Lord does not give up on his people but seeks to win them to faith by his rich promises.”

Israel complains that God has forsaken and forgotten her. The Hebrew verb for “to forsake” is *‘azab*. We find it for the first time in the Scriptures in the verse: “For this reason a man *will leave* his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”<sup>1</sup> There, it simply means: “to leave.” More dramatically it is used in the verse Jesus quoted on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you *forsaken* me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning?”<sup>2</sup> It would, obviously, be possible for God to forsake, but God forgetting anything is an impossibility. His omniscience does not allow for that. That is why God does not answer that part of the accusation.

The reason for Israel’s complaint is not specifically mentioned but it can be deduced from God’s answer. Israel’s reasoning seems to be that God reneged on His promise to Abraham: “I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.”<sup>3</sup> Of the people who were supposed to be as numerous as the sand on the beach, hardly anybody is left. God’s answer goes deeply into one of mankind’s most intimate and natural relationships, that of a mother and her baby. Breastfeeding must be one of the most satisfying and rewarding female activities. Speaking as a male member of the human race, I can only assume this. But I know that infants who lack this experience in the early part of their existence, who grow up with a bottle, lack some of their emotional props in adult life.

As in the father-child relationship, so here in the mother-baby connection, it is God who created these bonds of intimacy. God’s intent for children is that they learn something of His love for them through their relational experiences with their parents: the warmth of a mother’s love and the strong protection of a father’s affection. These physical and emotional relationships are meant to be a reflection of a spiritual relationship with God. They are the images; the reality is in God. If we got the wrong signals in our youth, we may find it difficult to relate properly to God later in life.

God’s argument is that, although a mother-child relationship may fail, although it is natural and instinctive, God’s love and affection for us cannot. How can a mother forget her baby while she is breastfeeding?

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1. Gen. 2:24

2. Ps. 22:1

3. Gen. 22:17

In v.16 there are various interpretations of the meaning about God engraving Israel on the palm of His hand. Some Bible scholars believe it refers to a Jewish custom to tattoo images of the temple or a holy site on their skin. Others see it as a figure of speech in the way Moses used speaking about the observance of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread: “This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that the law of the LORD is to be on your lips. For the LORD brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand. You must keep this ordinance at the appointed time year after year.”<sup>1</sup> According to *Barnes’ Notes*, some suppose “that it alludes to the custom of architects, in which they delineate the size, form, and proportions of an edifice on parchment, before they commence building it—such as we mean by the draft or model of the building; and that the sense here is, that God, in like manner, had delineated or drawn Jerusalem on his hands long before it was founded, and had it constantly before his eyes. According to this, the idea is, that God had laid out the plan of Jerusalem long before it was built, and that it was so dear to him that he had even engraved it on his hands. Others have supposed that it refers to a device on a signet, or on a ring worn on the finger or the wrist, and that the plan of Jerusalem was drawn and engraved there.” This idea seems to make the most sense to me since God speaks in the same breath about the walls of the city. If this interpretation is correct, Israel is identified with the city of Jerusalem. We find the same principle applied in the New Testament where the New Jerusalem is identical to the church, the Bride of Christ. We read in Revelation: “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”<sup>2</sup>

The Hebrew word *chaqqaq*, rendered “engraved,” has a ring of authority in it. Job uses it in the sense of writing down something as proof: “Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were *written* on a scroll.”<sup>3</sup> Jacob used it prophetically in his blessing of Judah: “*The scepter* will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.”<sup>4</sup>

This prophecy reaches beyond the rebuilding of the temple and the city of Jerusalem and the return of the captives. That historical event never reached the glorious peak Isaiah describes here. The glory of the Lord never came to the second or the third temple in the way it filled the edifice King Solomon had built. God’s glory was restored in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it will find its ultimately fulfillment when the New Jerusalem descends from heaven.

In this whole section God answers Zion’s complaint in v.14: “The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.” This makes only sense if we see it poetically. Mount Zion was a place, not a living individual. God looks at Zion in the same way as the Apostle Paul looked at Jerusalem: “Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.”<sup>5</sup> Paul speaks about the New Jerusalem, the Bride of Christ. That is also the sense in which God uses it, although the words speak initially about the return from Babylonian captivity. The word “bride” even occurs in this statement. The Hebrew text reads literally: “ ‘As surely as I live,’ says the LORD, ‘you shall clothe you [with] them all as with an ornament, and bind them [on you] as a bride does.’ ” The object here is the church, the body of Christ, consisting of Jews and Gentiles. Together they reflect the beauty of the Lord. Speaking about the return of Christ, the Apostle Paul refers to the glory of the saints as the glory of Christ Himself. We read: “When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day.”<sup>6</sup>

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1. Ex. 13:9,10
  2. Rev. 21:9,10
  3. Job 19:23
  4. Gen. 49:1
  5. Gal. 4:25,26

Vv.19-21 reveal some of the purpose of suffering. The Promised Land was laid in ruin when King Nebuchadnezzar led the people of Judah into captivity. The place of God's revelation was destroyed and, in a sense, this was the death of God, a picture of Jesus' crucifixion. The harvest of this greatest of all tragedies will be "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language."<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew word, rendered "bereavement" is *shikkuliyim*, which *The New King James Version* renders: "after you have lost the others." This is the only place in Scripture where this verse is found. *Barnes' Notes* calls them: "The sons of thy widowhood." That *Commentary* states: "That is, after thou hast lost those that have been killed in the wars, and those that have died in captivity in a distant land, there shall be again a great increase as if they were given to a widowed mother. And perhaps the general truth is taught here, that the persecution of the people of God will be attended ultimately with a vast increase; and that all the attempts to obliterate the church will only tend finally to enlarge and strengthen it."

It is as if God brings Israel back to the days when they had first entered Canaan and Joshua parceled out the land among the twelve tribes. We read: "The people of Joseph said to Joshua, 'Why have you given us only one allotment and one portion for an inheritance? We are a numerous people and the LORD has blessed us abundantly.' 'If you are so numerous,' Joshua answered, 'and if the hill country of Ephraim is too small for you, go up into the forest and clear land for yourselves there in the land of the Perizzites and Rephaites.' The people of Joseph replied, 'The hill country is not enough for us, and all the Canaanites who live in the plain have iron chariots, both those in Beth Shan and its settlements and those in the Valley of Jezreel.' But Joshua said to the house of Joseph-to Ephraim and Manasseh-'You are numerous and very powerful. You will have not only one allotment but the forested hill country as well. Clear it, and its farthest limits will be yours; though the Canaanites have iron chariots and though they are strong, you can drive them out.'"<sup>2</sup>

There is a note of exuberance and victory in these verses and also a touch of humor. The barren mother finds herself, all of a sudden, surrounded by children she never knew she had. Like Sarah, who said: "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me ... Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age,"<sup>3</sup> Israel will laugh and rejoice when they will finally recognize what God has done through her in the salvation of the world. When God called Abraham, He said: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."<sup>4</sup> Israel rarely understood that she was the instrument in God's hand for the blessing of all peoples on earth. Isaiah's prophecy speaks about the days when Israel's eyes will be opened and she will realize what her role in God's plan of salvation will be. In a way, we share in Israel's ignorance. We seldom realize what God is doing through us for other people.

V.22 reads literally in Hebrew: "Thus says the LORD God, behold I will lift up My hand to the Gentiles and set up my standard to the people." The Hebrew word, rendered "standard" is *nec*. The word is used the first time in Scripture in the verse: "The LORD said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived."<sup>5</sup> The use of the word in the context of Isaiah's prophecy makes us understand that God's standard here is the cross. Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."<sup>6</sup>

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6. II Thess. 1:10 (*King James Version*)

1. See Rev. 7:9.

2. Josh. 17:14-18

3. Gen. 21:6,7

4. Gen. 12:2,3

5. Num. 21:8,9

Although the first application of Isaiah's prophecy is to Israel's return from captivity, its ultimate fulfillment will be in the salvation of all who respond to Israel's Messiah. An important feature in this process is the recognition by the rest of the world that "salvation is from the Jews."<sup>1</sup> This is portrayed in the kings and queens coming to lick the dust at Israel's feet. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "As in 45:14 the picture of servility emphasizes a spiritual truth, that those who would join the Lord's people must first submit to them (1 Cor. 14:25). The imagery is political subservience, the reality is spiritual indebtedness." The Scripture reference with its preceding verse reads: "But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'"<sup>2</sup>

The last part of v.23 reads literally in Hebrew: "Those who wait for me shall not be ashamed." The Hebrew verb "to wait" is *qavah*, which has the meaning of binding something together by twisting. This is illustrated in *Ecclesiastes* in the verse: "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."<sup>3</sup> Waiting for the Lord is not just a matter of time, but of intimate fellowship. This takes strength and courage, as David suggests in: "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD."<sup>4</sup> Isaiah expressed a similar thought earlier, although in different words, in a prophecy regarding the Messiah: "So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.'"<sup>5</sup>

Vv.24 and 25 suggest that, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."<sup>6</sup> In order to deliver those who had been carried away into captivity, God had to defeat the powers that kept Israel in captivity. Not only the kings of Babylon had to be conquered, but, primarily, the prince of Babylon had to be bound. Jesus indirectly quoted v.24, when accused of being in league with Beelzebub, He said: "Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house."<sup>7</sup>

Commenting on v.26, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, says: "The pictures of eating *their own flesh* and drinking *their own blood* draw on the horrors of siege conditions. The reality is that those who oppose the Lord and his people experience the self-destructiveness of sin – a recurring feature of the wars of the Lord." God borrows here the image of human war which turns human beings into cannibals. During the siege of Samaria, some people ate their own children.<sup>8</sup> It may be difficult for us to see how such acts of human depravity can be applied to spiritual warfare. But spiritual cannibalism does exist. Satan devours what is his and thus he destroys himself. Jesus says: "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?"<sup>9</sup> In the context in which He said this, it does not mean that Satan practices cannibalism, but the principle of corruption, which is the basis of the enemy's power, will ultimately signify the devil's defeat. When life leaves the body, corruption will turn that body into dust. The spiritual principle works the same as the physical.

6. John 3:14-15
1. John 4:22
2. I Cor. 14:24,25
3. Eccl. 4:12
4. Ps. 27:14
5. Isa. 28:16
6. Eph. 6:12
7. Matt. 12:29
8. See II Kings 6:26-30.
9. Matt. 12:25,26

Corruption and decay become proof of the fact that God is the Lord of life and everything that severs itself from God is doomed to destruction. That is how all mankind will know that God saves Jacob. The use of Jacob's name instead of Israel is significant. Jacob, the deceiver, is saved by his next-of-kin, the Almighty.

Chapter 50 looks back on the theme of the verse that closed the previous chapter: Jacob's condition and God's dealing with that condition. Isaiah zooms in on God's intimate relationship with Israel in the same way as the prophet Hosea does. In Hosea's prophecy God says to His people: "Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts. Otherwise I will strip her naked and make her as bare as on the day she was born; I will make her like a desert, turn her into a parched land, and slay her with thirst. I will not show my love to her children, because they are the children of adultery."<sup>1</sup> In Isaiah's prophecy, God states that Israel's behavior had been such that He ought to have divorced her, but He did not.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: "Isaiah pursues the question of legality, raised in 49:24–25. He offers two pictures: divorce and slavery. According to Deuteronomy 24:1–4, a divorce could initiate a series of events making reconstitution of the original marriage impossible. The absence here of a *certificate* shows that this process has not even started. As to slavery, in default of payment, a creditor was legally entitled to enslave the debtor's dependants (Ex. 21:7; 2 Ki. 4:1ff.; Ne. 5:1–5), and, as long as this situation obtained, all rights lay with the creditor, none with the debtor. In both cases there were legal requirements to be met. But are these situations applicable? Divorce accuses unfaithful love of failure; slavery accuses sovereign power of weakness and sovereign resources of inadequacy. The truth, however, is very different, for it was all a matter of due reward of *sins* (*ʿavon*, 1f), inner perversion of heart (6:7), and *transgressions* (*pesha*`, 1g), 'willful rebellion.' "

In v.1 the Lord speaks to the children about the mother. Unfaithfulness affects generations. That is why marital infidelity and divorce is often harder on the children than on the spouse who commits the sin. God is the wounded party in this affair. It is the same hurt that speaks here as in Hosea's "Rebuke your mother." The Hebrew text in Hosea reads literally: "Plead with your mother, plead for she is not my wife..." The verb used is *riyb*, which has the meaning of "to toss," or "to wrangle." Isaiah used it in the verse: "Woe to him who *quarrels* with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'?"<sup>2</sup>

The point of this conversation is that the children of an unfaithful mother must make a choice as to whose side they are on, on the Lord's or on the side of sinful infidelity. As it turns out, this generation has already made the wrong choice. In Isaiah's day Israel had not yet been sold in slavery, had not yet been taken into Babylonian captivity, but their sinful behavior would lead to this unless they would repent. These words are, therefore, an announcement of judgment to come. Israel's history ought to have convinced the people that God was sufficiently strong to keep and protect them. The plagues of Egypt and the miracles that accompanied the exodus were proof enough. But the people had forgotten where they came from. The Apostle Peter puts this in New Testament terms, saying: "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."<sup>3</sup>

The second part of this chapter, vv.4-11, refers to this "lamb without blemish or defect." J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: "A new voice cuts across the Lord's indignant expostulations (2–3). Contradicting the 'no-one at all' of verse 2, there is one who testifies to listening and responding (5). The speaker uses the first person but does not identify himself, and it is not until the 'tailpiece' (10–11) that we learn we have been listening to the Servant. Arising from the easily overlooked clue in 49:7 that the Servant

1. Hosea 2:2-4
2. Isa. 45:9
3. I Peter 1:18,19

is a sufferer ('despised and abhorred') and subordinated, deeply personal sufferings are described and traced back to their cause in resolute obedience to the Lord. Four times *the Sovereign LORD* – Yahweh, the saving God in all his absolute power – is given the emphatic position (4, 5, 7, 9) and divides the testimony into its component parts.”

V. 4 reads literally in Hebrew: “The Lord God has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: morning by morning he wakens my ear to hear as the learned.” The Hebrew word translated “learned” is *limmuwd*, which occurs twice in this verse. “The Sovereign LORD has given me an *instructed* tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like *one being taught*. The same word is also found two other times in Isaiah’s manuscript. Once in “Bind up the testimony and seal up the law among my *disciples*,”<sup>1</sup> and once in “All your sons *will be taught* by the LORD, and great will be your children’s peace.”<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah’s prophecy about this feature of the Messiah was literally fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We read: “The Jews were amazed and asked, ‘How did this man get such learning without having studied?’ Jesus answered, ‘My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me.’”<sup>3</sup> It also applies to all who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, as the Apostle John states: “As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit — just as it has taught you, remain in him.”<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that one ought not to study but it differentiates between knowledge and wisdom.

When one wakes up in the morning, it is usually the eyes that are opened, giving awareness of the reality of a new day. Here it is the ear that is tuned in to the voice of God, giving access into spiritual reality.

This understanding of the spiritual reality in the hearing of God’s voice is also expressed in David’s prophecy about the Messiah in one of his Psalms that reads: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’”<sup>5</sup> This is a reference to the decision of the Hebrew slave who had the right to be free, but who said: “I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free.” In that case the master had to take his slave to the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl, opening his ear in the literal sense of the word.<sup>6</sup>

“Rebellious” is the translation of the Hebrew word *marah*, meaning: “bitter.” In most cases it is translated “rebellious,” except in the verses: “When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was *bitter*. (That is why the place is called Marah.)”<sup>7</sup> and “The LORD had seen how *bitterly* everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them.”<sup>8</sup> The word suggests that obedience to God’s command can lead us into situations that seem incongruous to God’s character and intent. The way to glory is small and difficult and we tend to rebel against some of the experiences God allows us to go through. God’s perfect plan may leave a bitter taste in our mouth. This was particularly true for the Messiah who had to go through inconceivable suffering in order to bring about the salvation of the world. And for each of us it remains true that “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>9</sup>

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1. Isa. 8:16
  2. Isa. 54:13
  3. John 7:15,16
  4. I John 2:27
  5. Ps. 40:6-8
  6. See Ex. 21:5,6.
  7. Ex. 15:23
  
  8. II Kings 14:26

V.6 describes to a fault what Jesus would go through, even before His crucifixion, when the Roman soldiers played their sadistic games with Him.<sup>1</sup> It must have been to verses like these Jesus referred when He explained the reason for His suffering to the two travelers of Emmaus. We read: “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”<sup>2</sup>

The Servant knew that God would see Him through the suffering that awaited Him and that He would be victorious. That allowed Him to set His “face like a flint.” The Hebrew word used is *challamiysh*, which stands for hard rock. We find it in the verse: “He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of *hard rock*.”<sup>3</sup> Luke catches Jesus’ mood as He set out for Jerusalem and His death on the cross. We read: “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.”<sup>4</sup> The Greek word used there is *sterizo*, meaning: “to turn resolutely in a certain direction.” A modern equivalent would be to say that a decision is poured in concrete. All this expresses some of the deep struggle that must have taken place in the Savior’s soul to come to this point. He faced severe demonic opposition, which is evident from His outburst to Peter when the latter suggested that He ought not to consider that option and Jesus shouted: “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”<sup>5</sup>

God’s vindication is Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. This victory over death makes us all “more than conquerors.”<sup>6</sup> The Apostle Paul turns Isaiah’s words around and, instead of applying them to the Lord Jesus Christ, applies them to us, saying: “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”<sup>7</sup> When we are under demonic attack, a reminder to the enemy of God’s vindication in the resurrection from the dead will make the enemy run.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, calls vv.10 and 11 “the ‘tailpiece’ of the first two Servant Songs.” We read: “The ‘tailpiece’ of the first two Servant Songs (42:5–9; 49:7–13) confirmed aspects of the Servant’s task; the present and final ‘tailpieces’ (54:1 – 55:13) are appeals to respond to the Servant. The uniting idea of these verses is *light* (10d, 11c). There are two sorts of people: the one sort (10) *has no light* but *obeys the word of the Lord’s Servant* by facing the darkness with *trust* and reliance. The others (11) seek to conquer the darkness by fires of their own making. The outcome for the first is not specified; the others suffer an adverse divine reaction (11e) and *lie down in torment* (11f). The perfection of the One against whom no charge can be made (8) makes him our model (10); the fate of his accusers (9) is shared by those who refuse his way (11). Just as he lived in obedience (5), trust and reliance (7, 9) so do those who model themselves on him (10).”

d. Salvation in prospect: the watching remnant (51:1–52:12)

i. Commands to listen: promises of salvation (51:1–8)

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9. Acts 14:22
  1. See Matt. 27:27-31.
  2. Luke 24:26,27
  3. Deut. 8:15
  4. Luke 9:51
  5. Matt. 16:23
  6. See Rom. 8:37.
  7. Rom. 8:33,34

**1 "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn;**

**2 look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many.**

**3 The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing.**

**4 "Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations.**

**5 My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm.**

**6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.**

**7 "Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts: Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults.**

**8 For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool. But my righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations."**

In his *Isaiah*, J. Alec Motyer gives the following introduction to this whole section of 51:1 – 52:12: "Isaiah 50:10 is important in Isaiah's progressive delineation of the Servant. When the Servant first appeared in 42:1, it was logical to link him with the servant, Israel, of 41:8; but the exposure of Israel as blind, bound and spiritually guilty (42:18–25) ruled that identification out, and 48:1 together with 49:3 sealed the contrast between the Israel who had lost its right to the name and the Servant who alone possessed the name. The tailpiece to the Servant's testimony in 50:4–9 takes matters another step forward: the Servant is distinguished as the model for all who would live the life of trust and reliance – in other words, the identity of the Servant is not the believing remnant within the nation. In 8:9–20 Isaiah made fear of the Lord (8:13), finding refuge in him (14) and loyalty to his 'testimony,' 'law' and 'word' (16, 20) the hallmarks of the remnant; but now that 'fear' and obedience are centered on the Servant, who is the point of differentiation between believers (50:10) and unbelievers (50:11). It is on this note that 51:1 launches the next section with its opening address to all who *pursue righteousness* and *seek the LORD*, *i.e.* the faithful remnant. It is a continuous and coherent presentation: the opening three calls to listen (51:1, 4, 7) are matched by the concluding three calls for alertness and action (51:17; 52:1, 11). At the center lies a dramatic appeal to the Lord to act (51:9–11) followed by a meditative interlude (51:12–16)."

"The rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn" in v.1, appears to refer Abraham and Sarah in v.2. But the image used invites us to look beyond the surface of the words. It seems that, if the Lord wanted to convey the idea of mere descent, He would have used another figure of speech than being cut out of a rock. Israel was not merely "a chip off the old block."

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: "The mistake of the Jews, heretofore, has been, not in that they 'followed after righteousness,' but in that they followed it 'by the works of the law,' instead of 'by faith,' as Abraham (Rom 9:31-32; 10:3-4; 4:2-5)."

The words are addressed to those who "pursue righteousness." The Hebrew word for "pursue" is *radaph*, which has a rather violent tone to it. We find it used in the verses: "When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and *went in pursuit* as far as Dan. During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, *pursuing* them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus."<sup>1</sup> Those who pursue righteousness are intent on obtaining it, whatever the cost. Both Abraham and Sarah believed God's promises and thus were declared righteous. This may be

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1. Gen. 14:14,15

stated more clearly in the case of Abraham than of Sarah, for God testified: “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”<sup>1</sup> Sarah’s righteousness was demonstrated more indirectly at the birth of Isaac when she testified that the Lord had made her laugh.<sup>2</sup>

It seems to make more sense to see the rock and the quarry as representative of God’s promise which imputes righteousness to those who believe it. There is a sense in which we can apply Paul’s statement here that “that rock was Christ.”<sup>3</sup> God’s promises are poured in concrete, which is the closest to building upon a rock we get to in our modern society. It is about this solid foundation that Paul said: “But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not ‘Yes’ and ‘No,’ but in him it has always been ‘Yes.’ For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”<sup>4</sup> Abraham believed that God would make him into many and the people addressed here are proof of the solid truth of this promise of God.

God’s comfort to Israel would be, first of all, the promise of a return from captivity. Israel’s ruined cities would be rebuilt and her ruined land would become “Paradise Regained.” Those who return would express the same laughter Sarah laughed. And, in fact, as the Psalmist sings: “When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, ‘The LORD has done great things for them.’ The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.”<sup>5</sup>

Isaiah expressed this kind of exuberant joy in an earlier chapter, indicating that more than mere restoration of a previous condition is envisioned. We read: “The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”<sup>6</sup>

The “Listen to me” that opens the second beginning with v.4, restores Israel to what it was intended to be: “a kingdom of priests,” a mediator between God and the rest of the world. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, writes above vv.4-6 the heading “The world, light and salvation.” He comments on this: “If anything, this section confirms the thought that *Listen* (lit. ‘pay attention’) *to me* may well be the voice of the Servant, speaking in his divine nature. The verses are full of reminiscences of the first Servant passage (42:1-4, 5-9) with references to *justice*, *light* and *righteousness*. The created order in 42:5 illustrates the Lord’s power to do as he has planned through his Servant; here its transitoriness is a foil for his eternal salvation. Likewise the reference to *arm* (5) prepares for verse 9 and looks on to 53:1.”

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1. Gen. 15:6
  2. See Gen. 21:6,7.
  3. I Cor. 10:4
  4. II Cor. 1:18-22
  5. Ps. 126:1-3
  6. See Isa. 35:1,2, 5,6,8-10.

Bible scholars have debated whether “my people” and “my nation” (in Hebrew *`am* and *leom*), pertains to Israel or to the pagan world. Some scholars consider the words to be plural; others see them as singulars. *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* does not believe they are plurals, stating: “An address to the heathen would be quite out of harmony with the character of the whole prophecy, which is carried out quite consistently throughout.” *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “The Jews are called on to hear and rejoice in the extension of the true religion to the nations; because, at the final preaching of the Gospel, as in the final age to come, it was from Jerusalem that the Gospel law was and is to go forth (Isa 2:3).” That verse reads: “Many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.”

Key words in this section are “law” v.4, “justice” v.4, “righteousness” vv.5,6 and “salvation” v.5,6. If we consider these words to be the words of the Messiah, as Motyer suggests, we must place them in the context of His redemptive work in His death and resurrection. As the Apostle Paul states, the Gospel is the message of God’s righteousness which is imputed to us: “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”<sup>1</sup> And: “To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus said about the law: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”<sup>3</sup> In His death He fulfilled both the ceremonial law and the moral law. In dying for us, He became “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” And in His resurrection He imputes His righteousness to us which enables us to walk according to the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul puts that this way: “For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> That is the justice God provides for those whose hope and faith is in Him.

All this is set against the background of God’s final judgment and the end of the universe. The material creation, as we know it now, will not last forever, but God’s salvation and righteousness will. The Apostle Peter comments on this, saying: “Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”<sup>5</sup>

- ii. A dramatic appeal: exodus past and future (51:9–11)

***9 Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the LORD; awake, as in days gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through?***

***10 Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made a road in the depths of the sea so that the redeemed might cross over?***

***11 The ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.***

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1. Rom. 1:17
  2. Rom. 4:5
  3. Matt. 5:17
  4. Rom. 8:3,4
  5. II Peter 3:11-13

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, gives the following introduction to this section: “Like 45:8 following 45:1–7, the promises of 51:1–8 prompt an excited appeal that the Lord will act without delay. Who is the speaker? It cannot now be the Servant because (53:1) he is the Arm of the Lord to whom this appeal is made; maybe it is the prophet, excited beyond restraint by the vision he has enunciated; maybe it is the believing remnant longing for the prompt realization of all they have ever wanted. The fact is that the way to react to the Lord’s promises is to pray urgently for their fulfillment (*cf.* Ps. 44:23).” This last Scripture reference reads: “Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.”

Isaiah, if he is the one speaking, projects a human image on the eternal God. As in the story of Samson and Delilah, where Samson has fallen asleep on Delilah’s lap,<sup>1</sup> God is called to wake up. The difference here is, of course, that God’s strength has not departed from Him as it had from Samson. But above all, God never dozes off, as the Psalmist sang: “He will not let your foot slip — he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”<sup>2</sup>

Were it not for the mention of “Rahab,” these verses would be an easily understood allusion to the past exodus from Egypt as a model for the return of the captives from Babylon. But who or what is “Rahab?” *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Here, as in ... Psalm 87:4 and 89:10, ‘Rahab’ would seem to be a symbolical expression for Egypt. ‘Rahab’ is literally ‘pride,’ or ‘the proud one.’ The event alluded to, both here and in ... Psalm 89:10, is the destruction of Pharaoh’s host in the Red Sea (see ver. 10). ... ‘The dragon’ is another symbol of the Egyptian power (comp. ... Ezekiel 29:3, ‘Pharaoh, King of Egypt, the great dragon that lieth in the midst of his rivers’). Originally designating God’s great enemy, Satan (... Genesis 3:14; ... Revelation 12:7-9; 20:2), it is a term which comes to be applied to the adversaries of the Almighty generally.” *The Fausset’s Bible Dictionary* adds to this: “Egypt is put foremost, as first of the great world powers that opposed God. She was reduced to corpse-like helplessness by God’s stroke at the Red Sea, and at the slaying of the firstborn previously.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, gives, probably, the best explanation: “Rahab (‘Tiamat’) was also the sea monster, in Canaanite-Babylonian mythology the deified personification of disorder, typified by the restless, threatening sea, which the creator-god Marduk must subdue before he may pursue the work of ordered creation. The Bible, of course, knows of no such pre-creation combat of opposing forces, but it is not above using the sea and Rahab as a means of asserting the sole and sovereign power of the Lord (Jb. 26:11–12; Ps. 89:8ff; Am. 9:3). Isaiah does not give credence to the existence of such ‘gods,’ but signals in this way that the people of God are always challenged in their loyalty by other claimants to devotion, yet their history displays their God as the only God and One with power over all the power of the enemy. The Red Sea crossing (10) exemplified that the ‘sea’ for all its monstrous unruliness can do only the Lord’s bidding (Ps. 93:3–4). Nothing can stand in his way, neither impenetrable physical barriers nor supernatural powers.”

In using the image of God as the great dragon slayer, Isaiah not only refers to the past to the way God dealt with the gods of Egypt, but also to the future in which the total and final defeat of Satan is accomplished. This makes the exodus an image of what John sees in Revelation, where Satan is portrayed as an enormous red dragon.<sup>3</sup> For Isaiah this meant the return of the ransomed from Babylonian captivity. The Hebrew word for “ransom” is *padah*. We find it for the first time in Scripture in the verse “Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not *redeem* it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.”<sup>4</sup> Redemption is accomplished by means of the payment of a ransom. God paid the price for our redemption with the blood of His Son.

The picture Isaiah paints of the captives’ return from Babylon to Zion, singing and wearing crowns of everlasting joy far surpasses what we know of that historical fact. This indicates that the prophet sees well

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1. See Judg. 16:6-20.
  2. Ps. 121:3,4
  3. See Rev. 13.
  4. Ex. 13:13

beyond the actual physical return of a few thousand captives. As the liberation from Egyptian slavery stood for more than what the actual facts warrant, so does the return from captivity, which for Isaiah, was still in the remote future. V.11 is an exact copy of Isa. 35:10. *Barnes' Notes* comments there: "The language here is all derived from the deliverance from Babylon, and the images employed by the prophet relate to that event. Still, there can be no doubt that he meant to describe the deliverance under the Messiah."

The singing of the returning captives is like the singing of the pilgrims on their way to the temple of Jerusalem. There is a whole series of Songs of Ascents in The Book of Psalms that gives us the texts of what was being sung. The difference here in Isaiah's picture is that the joy is everlasting, making it more than a physical journey to a holy place on earth.

Isaiah uses two different words for "joy" in this verse. The first one, *simchah*, has the meaning of a celebration of victory. We find it in the verses: "When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with *joyful* songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced, they sang: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.'"<sup>1</sup> The second word is *sasown* which refers to a state of mind, as in the verse: "Restore to me *the joy* of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me."<sup>2</sup> In Jesus Christ we experience both the joy of our salvation and the joy of victory over sin and Satan.

iii. Interlude: a final briefing (51:12–16)

**12 "I, even I, am he who comforts you. Who are you that you fear mortal men, the sons of men, who are but grass,**

**13 that you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction? For where is the wrath of the oppressor?**

**14 The cowering prisoners will soon be set free; they will not die in their dungeon, nor will they lack bread.**

**15 For I am the LORD your God, who churns up the sea so that its waves roar — the LORD Almighty is his name.**

**16 I have put my words in your mouth and covered you with the shadow of my hand — I who set the heavens in place, who laid the foundations of the earth, and who say to Zion, 'You are my people.'"**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, gives the following introduction to this section: "The doubling of *I ... I* (12) responds to the double *awake, awake* (9) – "I am every bit as awake as you may need!" At first sight these verses excite doubt about the textual reliability: in verse 12a *you* is masculine plural; in 12bc, feminine singular; and in 13–16 masculine singular! In 13–14 *you* is a *cowering* captive, but in 15–16 a prophetic figure with a universal ministry. It would be the work of seconds to harmonize all this, but it would leave the question unanswered as to who is being addressed. It is better to ask if, within the context, anyone matches the changes of masculine and feminine. The masculine singular of verses 15–16 matches the Servant, endowed with the Lord's word (16a, 42:4; 49:2; 50:4), sheltered (16b, 49:2) and with a universal, Zion-centered task (16c-e, 42:1; 49:5–6). The doomed prisoner of 13–14 is a picture drawn from captivity. The accusation (13a) of forgetfulness refocuses the complaint of 49:14. The feminine in 12bc is therefore desolate Zion, the 'mother' of her inhabitants. This leaves the plural word of comfort (12a) as an address to all (Zion, the captive and the Servant), and, significantly, 12b–16 follow the same order (city, captives, Servant) that has already occurred in 49:12–21; 49:22 – 50:3; and 50:4–9, and that will be repeated in 51:17 – 52:2; 52:3–12; 52:13 – 53:12. The mosaic in verses 12–16 is thus coherent. The Lord offers his reassurance to all the *dramatis personae* of the coming events."

1. I Sam. 18:6,7

2. Ps. 51:12

God reveals Himself in these verses as the Creator-Comforter. The Hebrew word *nacham* literally means: “to sigh,” indicating pity or compassion. There are two profound implications in the wording of these verses. The fact that God reveals Himself as Creator gives the assurance of His power. As a Comforter, He identifies with our sorrow to the point where He becomes one with us in our suffering. The comfort God gives us consists in the fact that the Creator of heaven and earth became one of us and took our sin and sorrow upon Himself, thus taking the cause of our misery away. He became our scapegoat, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. If that is no comfort, nothing is. The word *nacham* occurs in the verse “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.”<sup>1</sup>

It is God’s comfort that frees us of the power of fear of man. Jesus, however, places deliverance from the fear of man in the context of fear of God, saying: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”<sup>2</sup>

The question “who are you?” is meant to remind us of our status in our relationship with God. In Jesus’ statement above, the comparison is between man and sparrow; in Isaiah it is between man and man. The difference in importance in the first comparison is in the order of creation. Man ranks higher than the birds and the rest of creation because God has set us as Lord over His creation. In the second comparison the difference is man’s relationship with God; it is the difference between the righteous and the unrighteous. We are all, in a sense, mortal, but in the words of the Apostle John, “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”<sup>3</sup> It is our hope of eternity, which those who make us afraid do not have, that ought to alleviate our fear of man.

People who oppress their fellowmen have lost the concept of the image of God in their own life and, consequently, they do not recognize it in their neighbor. It is God, the Creator, in whose image we are created, who gives us the comfort and takes away our fear. The author of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* emphasizes that the assurance of God’s protection will influence our lifestyle. We read: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’ ”<sup>4</sup> Fear of man is ultimately fear of death. People can kill the body and often they do. But again in *Hebrews*, we read: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”<sup>5</sup> If the comfort of God, as evinced in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, takes away our fear of death it will also deliver us from the fear of man.

Grass is often used in the Bible as a symbol of the transience of life. David was the first one to use it as such in the Psalm that reads: “Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.”<sup>6</sup> And more generally in: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children — with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.”<sup>7</sup>

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1. Isa. 40:1
  2. Matt. 10:28-31
  3. I John 2:17
  4. Heb. 13:5,6
  5. Heb. 2:14,15
  6. Ps. 37:1,2

God points His cowering children to creation to remind them that the power that called everything into being is the same power that saves. One glance up to the starry night sky reminds us of God's power and majesty and gives us the assurance that God has what it takes to lead and protect us in life.

V.14 promises unconditional freedom to captives who are cowering in prison and starving to death. Our problem may be that some people do starve in prison. In the book *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom describes her experience in a Nazi concentration camp where her sister, Betsie, died. She, however, would be the last one to question God's purpose in all of their suffering, which led her to a ministry of worldwide evangelism.

The first fulfillment of this prophecy pertains, undoubtedly, to Israel's return from Babylonian captivity, but it also has a wider application to all kinds of imprisonment. When the Psalmist sings: "He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked,"<sup>1</sup> he, obviously, speaks about more than incarceration by government authorities. The implication can hardly be that criminals ought not to pay for their crimes. When Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,"<sup>2</sup> He spoke about the imprisonment of sin.

What can be said about captivity also applies to the roaring of the sea. God is, of course, the Creator of oceans and He controls the factors that cause storms and waves. But the sea can also be seen as symbolic for the behavior of nations. As J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "*Sea* pictures the turbulent forces encountered in life (Ps. 93), but the raging is itself his work (Ps. 107:25–26; Je. 31:35; Am. 4:13; 5:8; 9:5–6). If we find ourselves 'in the soup,' it is he who has decreed the recipe and the temperature."

V.16 is addressed to the Messiah who conveys the message of salvation to His people. Jesus' words are the words of the Father. In His last address to His disciples, Jesus emphasized: "The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work."<sup>3</sup> The people to whom these words are addressed are not longer called Israel, but Zion. Zion is the place of God's revelation on earth. Bible scholars have argued about whether the Servant here is the whole nation of Israel or the person of the Messiah. There are also some linguistic problems in the Hebrew text that the experts disagree about. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "*I who set* (lit. 'planted') is an extremely improbably translation of this, the first of three Hebrew infinitives setting out what the Lord has in mind for his Servant to do: 'that I may (*i.e.* through you)' or 'that you may (on my behalf) plant ... lay ... say.' Planting is a new beginning; laying foundations represents permanence of achievement. The Servant is the origin of a new cosmic reality. (Jeremiah 1:9–10) was called to 'plant kingdoms'; the Servant will plant heaven and earth, a new-creational work such as only God can do. Finally, the Servant is 'to say to Zion': at the center of the Lord's cosmic purposes is his people. *My people*: the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promise (49:8; Ex. 6:7)."

The last phrase of v.16 puts forth the creation of heaven and earth and the election of Zion as one single act. The creation of the physical and spiritual redemption is dealt with as one and the same act of creation. The Apostle Paul stresses this unity in the statement: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."<sup>4</sup>

iv. Commands to respond: what the Lord has done (51:17–52:12)

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7. Ps. 103:13-18
  1. Ps. 146:7-9
  2. John 8:34-36
  3. John 14:10
  4. II Cor. 4:6

*17 Awake, awake! Rise up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath, you who have drained to its dregs the goblet that makes men stagger.*

*18 Of all the sons she bore there was none to guide her; of all the sons she reared there was none to take her by the hand.*

*19 These double calamities have come upon you — who can comfort you? — ruin and destruction, famine and sword — who can console you?*

*20 Your sons have fainted; they lie at the head of every street, like antelope caught in a net. They are filled with the wrath of the LORD and the rebuke of your God.*

*21 Therefore hear this, you afflicted one, made drunk, but not with wine.*

*22 This is what your Sovereign LORD says, your God, who defends his people: "See, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger; from that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again.*

*23 I will put it into the hands of your tormentors, who said to you, 'Fall prostrate that we may walk over you.' And you made your back like the ground, like a street to be walked over."*

*Chapter 52:1 Awake, awake, O Zion, clothe yourself with strength. Put on your garments of splendor, O Jerusalem, the holy city. The uncircumcised and defiled will not enter you again.*

*2 Shake off your dust; rise up, sit enthroned, O Jerusalem. Free yourself from the chains on your neck, O captive Daughter of Zion.*

*3 For this is what the LORD says: "You were sold for nothing, and without money you will be redeemed."*

*4 For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "At first my people went down to Egypt to live; lately, Assyria has oppressed them.*

*5 "And now what do I have here?" declares the LORD. "For my people have been taken away for nothing, and those who rule them mock," declares the LORD. "And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed.*

*6 Therefore my people will know my name; therefore in that day they will know that it is I who foretold it. Yes, it is I."*

*7 How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"*

*8 Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes.*

*9 Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.*

*10 The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.*

*11 Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing! Come out from it and be pure, you who carry the vessels of the LORD.*

*12 But you will not leave in haste or go in flight; for the LORD will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard.*

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: "Three double commands, balancing the three promises of 51:1–8, suggest that the promises have been fulfilled and the time has come to enter into them. Zion is called to wake up to the fact that divine wrath is over and gone (51:17–23, esp. 22), to wake up to holiness (52:1–10) and to embark on a new exodus as pure pilgrims (52:11–12). But the question remains: how have the promises been fulfilled? How has wrath been removed, holiness established and the way opened for pilgrims? The answer comes with the final command in the series: 'See, my servant' (53:13)" The same *Commentary* continues: "The first promise (51:1–3) was of Eden restored, the curse removed. So here the wrath of God is over. This is where salvation begins: the satisfaction of the requirements of a holy God (Rom.1:16–18). This section is in two parts: the cup drunk (17–20) and the cup removed (21–23).

Divine wrath reduced Jerusalem to helplessness, but while she slept the cup has been removed: the wrath is over.”

The first person to use the image of a cup of wine as representation of the wrath of God was Asaph, who said on one of his Psalms: “In the hand of the LORD is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs.”<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah used it also, saying: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: ‘Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad because of the sword I will send among them.’ ”<sup>2</sup> Jesus, who drank it all in behalf of us, prayed in the garden of Gethsemane: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”<sup>3</sup> This makes the Babylonian captivity a picture of Jesus’ suffering on the cross.

Jerusalem in these verses is more than a city; it stands for those who lived in the city in the same way as the New Jerusalem stands for the bride of the Lamb.<sup>4</sup> Jerusalem’s sleep from which she awakes is a nightmare in which the people were taken into exile and the city destroyed. The mention of the cup of God’s wrath reminds the people of the prolonged siege and the severe famine that brought down the city. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The cup of God’s fury was poured out on Jerusalem when the city was taken by Nebuchadnezzar, the temple, the royal palace, and the houses of the nobles burnt (... 2 Kings 25:9), the walls broken down (... 2 Kings 25:10), and the bulk of the inhabitants carried away captive to Babylon (... 2 Kings 25:11; comp. ... 2 Chronicles 34:25; ... Jeremiah 42:18; 44:6; ... Ezekiel 22:31, etc.)” All this is captured in the picture of a man who drinks himself into oblivion and who wakes up with a hangover. Jerusalem’s awakening, however, is not with a hangover, but with the unexpected joy of restoration and renewal.

V.18 can hardly mean that no one in Jerusalem could have save the people from disaster by pointing them to the Lord. Isaiah was there with some of the other contemporary prophets. It was like the man *Ecclesiastes* mentions: “I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, ‘Wisdom is better than strength. But the poor man’s wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.’ ”<sup>5</sup> The idea is probably more like what God expressed to Ezekiel: “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.”<sup>6</sup> The picture is one of no escape as is illustrated in the antelope caught in a net. In *Revelation*, John paints two scenes in which people try to flee, but find themselves unable: “Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’ ”<sup>7</sup> And: “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.”<sup>8</sup> The only hope of escape from judgment is faith in Jesus Christ. As Jesus

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1. Ps. 75:8

2. Jer. 25:15,16

3. Matt. 26:39

4. See Rev. 21:9,10.

5. Eccl. 9:13-16

6. Ezek. 22:30

7. Rev. 6:15-17

8. Rev. 20:11

said: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”<sup>1</sup> V.19 expresses God’s sorrow about what happens to Jerusalem. Jeremiah would convey this later, saying: “What can I say for you? With what can I compare you, O Daughter of Jerusalem? To what can I liken you, that I may comfort you, O Virgin Daughter of Zion? Your wound is as deep as the sea. Who can heal you?”<sup>2</sup> There is a sense in which our sins hit God harder than they do us. After all, it was our iniquities that caused the death of His Son.

Commenting on vv.21 and 22, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “The *therefore* of verse 21 – held in suspense while the prophet described the humiliated city – is now further delayed while he describes the Lord. First he is *Sovereign*. Exceptionally, Isaiah uses the plural of the word here (<sup>a</sup>*donayik*) usually reserved for human relationships – as of husband to wife (1 Ki. 1:17), parent to child (Gn. 31:35). Could it be that Isaiah chose this form here in order to stress that the divine lordship comes down into the ordinary affairs of life? Transcendent though he is, his sovereignty is not remote but practical and everyday. Secondly, he is the *LORD*, revealed once and for all as the God who saves his people and overthrows his foes (Ex. 3:15; 6:6–7); thirdly, *your God*, the God who has freely committed himself to you and your welfare; and, fourthly, the God of absolute justice and legality *who defends (riyb)*, ‘pleads the cause’ of his people, takes their case to the bar of his justice.”

In an act of ultimate justice, God takes the cup of wrath from Jerusalem and gives it to Babylon. As in the case of Assyria, God’s instrument of wrath for the northern kingdom of Israel, so with Babylon, God pays them for what they did to His people.<sup>3</sup> Both Assyria and Babylon were God’s axe to inflict punishment to Israel and Judah, but they both enjoyed their role too much and gave themselves to the sadistic enjoyment of torture and killing. But the backs of the Israelites that became streets on which their oppressors walked, will become the streets of God in the New Jerusalem.

Introducing chapter 52, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “In verses 1–2, Zion is awakened to a new condition of holiness (1b–d), separation (1ef) and royalty (2); the initial *For* of verse 3 introduces an explanation: a free redemption (3), bondage (4–5) ended by divine self-revelation (6), bringing the triumphant new to Zion (7–10). There is a tension between the ‘already’ of verses 1–2, Zion awaking to holiness; the ‘not yet’ of verses 3–6, the Lord pondering the need, of his people; and the ‘now’ of verses 7–10, the divine action accomplished. Logically and chronologically the section should be in a different order, but drama dictates otherwise. In effect, then, Zion can awake to holiness (1–2) because (*for*, 3) the Lord contemplated her need (3–6) and took action (7–10).”

In these opening verses God addresses the New Jerusalem, the holy city. She is told to dress herself to get ready for the wedding. When the Apostle John saw the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven, the bride was already fully dressed with the glory of God. Here this vision is held before her like a mirror. The mention that there will be no uncircumcised or defiled persons in the city means that Jerusalem is fully prepared to enter into a legal intimate relationship with God. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant with God. God said to Abraham: “You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.”<sup>4</sup> As God sees Jerusalem, she is still sitting in the dust with a chain of slavery around her neck, but in reality she has been freed and rehabilitated. Historically, none of this had yet happened when Isaiah pronounced this prophecy. The captivity had not even occurred.

God looked over the ages to the end of time, not merely for their benefit, but also for ours. God wants us to realize, regardless of our circumstances, that we are free people, seated with Him in the heavenly places. We ought not to behave like slaves, even if we are that in a physical sense during our life on earth. This was the advice the Apostle Paul gave to Christian slaves of his time: “Were you a slave when you were

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1. John 5:24

2. Lam. 2:13

3. See Isa. 10:12-23.

4. Gen. 17:11

called? Don't let it trouble you-although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men."<sup>1</sup>

Our greatest problem with sin is that it is not a chain around our neck but in our heart. God sets us free, but we do not behave as people who have been freed. As God led Israel out of Egypt, they took Egypt with them in their hearts.

The whole tone of these first two verses is an acquisition of that which we legally possess in our position in Christ. If we are seated with Him in heaven, we ought to behave accordingly. The Apostle Paul states: "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."<sup>2</sup> And he followed this up with: "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God."<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, this liberation can only be done if the enemy has been defeated. In Jesus' words: "Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house."<sup>4</sup> Jesus bound the strong man so we can take his spoil and get ready for the big day.

The three statements in vv.3-5 actually pertain to one theme only: the honor of God. In the humiliation of the people of Israel, God was being maligned and blasphemed. There is mention of a purchase, but no money was exchanged, suggesting that the object that was handed over had no real value. Israel, and consequently God, had been handled as a piece of junk. Both Egypt and Assyria (and Babylon as well, although she is not mentioned here) had treated the people as cheap slave labor. But what man considered worthless is priceless to God. Since God has destined us to glory, He paid an enormous price for us. In the words of the Apostle Peter: "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."<sup>5</sup>

*Barnes' Notes* comments here: "You shall be delivered from your long and painful captivity without any price being paid to the Babylonians. This was to be a remarkable proof of the power of God. Men do not usually give up captives and slaves, in whatever way they may have taken them, without demanding a price or ransom. But here God says that he designs to effect their deliverance without any such price being demanded or paid, and that as they had gone into captivity unpurchased, so they should return unpurchased. Accordingly he so overruled events as completely to effect this. The Babylonians, perhaps, in no way could have been induced to surrender them. God, therefore, designed to raise up Cyrus, a mild, just, and equitable prince; and to dispose him to suffer the exiles to depart, and to aid them in their return to their own land. In this way, they were rescued without money and without price, by the interposition of another."

There is a mounting line from "For this is what the LORD says," (v.3), to "For this is what the Sovereign LORD says," (v.4), leading to the triumphant statement: "Your God reigns!" (v.7). God is in complete control of all the events. Earlier, this meant that God allowed His people to go into exile; now it means He restores them to freedom and dignity. In all this God identified Himself with His people in their humiliation so that they could identify with Him in His glory.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on vv.7-10: "Dramatically Isaiah brings us to the very moment when the 'awake, awake' (1) sounds in Zion's ears as a messenger comes over the hills to announce *salvation* and proclaim a sovereign God (7). Zion's watchmen cannot contain themselves (8), and the joy

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1. I Cor. 7:21-23
  2. Eph. 2:6
  3. Col. 3:1
  4. Matt. 12:29
  5. I Peter 1:18,19

spreads through the city (9ab). The Lord has himself acted to save (9c–10). The fourfold message of verse 7 and the fourfold ground of rejoicing (9c–10) bracket the swelling joy of the city (8–9b).”

The Apostle Paul applies Isaiah’s words to the preaching of the New Testament Gospel, quoting these words. We read: “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’”<sup>1</sup>

This proclamation “Your God reigns!” is an answer to the Lord’s prayer: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

In the historical record of Judah’s return from captivity we do not find these outbursts of joy by the watchmen. Actually, there were no watchmen on the scene when the first people returned from exile. Jerusalem had lain in ruins and there was nothing to watch. The purpose of Isaiah’s prophecy was, first of all, to prepare a script for those who would return. But no one looked at the script; everyone had his own opinion about what was priority and what wasn’t.

The first returnees set themselves to the task of rebuilding the temple; they built an altar and put down the foundation of the temple, but the opposition managed to make them stop by sending false reports to the central government. We read: “As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum and Shimshai the secretary and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop. Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”<sup>3</sup> This official edict was not reversed until the Lord’s prophets Haggai and Zechariah began to prophesy. We read: “Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, helping them.”<sup>4</sup>

Some of the text of Haggai’s exhortation is found in the book that carries his name. Reading this, we understand that the people had accepted the opposition as part of God’s plan, which conveniently allowed them to relax and do their own thing instead of serving the Lord. We read: “In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest: This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘These people say, ‘The time has not yet come for the LORD’s house to be built.’ ‘Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ‘Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?’ Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.’ This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,’ says the LORD. ‘You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?’ declares the LORD Almighty. ‘Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands.’ Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people

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1. Rom. 10:12-15
  2. Matt. 6:9,10
  3. Ezra 4:23,24
  4. Ezra 5:1,2

obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD.” Obviously, Isaiah’s blueprint had not been consulted.

Since there were not human watchmen who understood what was going on in Israel when the first captives returned, there many not have been much singing in around Jerusalem. But, as with the birth of Jesus Christ, God has His own choirs to sing new songs when human voices remain silent. God was the one celebrating while people were dazed, not knowing what was going on. The rebuilding of Jerusalem would be a monument to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, just as her destruction had exhibited His suffering and death. All this is part of the monument of God’s revelation of Himself in this world. Death of sin, victory over death and freedom for its victims demands a continuous celebration.

V.11 is a warning not to repeat the fatal fault the Israelites made when they left Egypt and took Egypt with them in their heart. Those who are freed from sin have to learn to touch it no longer and to keep clean from it. Even after healing, the danger of contagion is never over. The return from Babylon was not the same as the exodus from Egypt, when the Passover had to be celebrated in haste and no food could be left till the next morning. There would be no pursuing Egyptian or Babylonian army. The Persians who gave the command for the departure would not chase after them either. But they must not take Babylon and the spirit of Babylon home with them to Jerusalem.

e. Worldwide salvation (52:13–55:13)

i. The triumph of the Servant (52:13–53:12)

*13 See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.*

*14 Just as there were many who were appalled at him — his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness —*

*15 so will he sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.*

*Chapter 53:1 Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?*

*2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*

*3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

*4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.*

*5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

*6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

*7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*

*8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.*

*9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.*

*10 Yet it was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.*

*11 After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light [of life] and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.*

***12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.***

Commenting on the whole section of e, Worldwide salvation (52:13 - 55:13), J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “As we would now expect, this climactic section falls into two parts: the fourth Servant Song (52:13 – 53:12) and its ‘tailpiece.’ The latter extends to two chapters (54:1 – 55:13) in which, first, Zion is called into a covenant of peace (54:10) and, secondly, the invitation to the free banquet goes out to all (55:1–13).” On the subsection, **i The triumph of the Servant (52:13–53:12)**, Motyer observes: “Isaiah starts with an enigma: how can such an exaltation (13) arise out of such suffering (14); how can such suffering (14) lead to universal benefit and acknowledgment (15)? The Lord’s testimony to his Servant (13) blends into the statement of suffering and benefit (14–15). Balancing this opening there is the concluding section (53:10–12) which solves the enigma: the Servant’s suffering was a bearing of sin. This time the explanation of his sufferings (10–11b) blends into the Lord’s testimony to his Servant (11c–12). The three intervening stanzas follow a theme of birth (53:2) to death (53:9): how he grew up to an adult life of rejection and sorrow (1–3), the hidden explanation of his sorrow and suffering (4–6) and how such suffering reached its outcome in death and burial (7–9).”

This section starts with a statement of the Messiah’s exaltation as a result of His wise and prudent behavior. In a footnote, *The New International Version* gives this alternate reading about the word “wisely”: “Or will prosper.” The Hebrew word used is *sakal*, which means “to be circumspect,” or “to be intelligent.” We find the word *sakal* for the first time in the verse “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for *gaining wisdom*, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”<sup>1</sup> In the meaning of “to prosper,” we find it in the verse: “Carefully follow the terms of this covenant, so that you may *prosper* in everything you do.”<sup>2</sup> The words “raised,” “lifted up” and “highly exalted” are, of course ambiguous because of the way the Lord Jesus uses them in “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”<sup>3</sup>

“Raised” is the rendering of the Hebrew word *ruwm*, which usually refers to the physical fact or condition of being above something, as in the verse: “For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased they *lifted* the ark *high above* the earth.”<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew word *nasa’* is almost synonymous to *ruwm*. We find it also in connection with the flood, in the verse “For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased they *lifted* the ark *high above* the earth.”<sup>5</sup> “Highly exalted” is the translation of the Hebrew word *gabahh*, which literally means: “to soar.” The Bible gives this testimony about King Jehoshaphat, “His heart was *devoted* to the ways of the LORD; furthermore, he removed the high places and the Asherah poles from Judah.”<sup>6</sup>

In these various meanings the application to our Lord’s suffering and death remains. It was in His being lifted up physically in His crucifixion that the purity of His heart, the greatness of His Spirit and His devotion to the Father was manifested. In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus used the same kind of language: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”<sup>7</sup>

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1. Gen. 3:6
  2. Deut. 29:9
  3. John 12:32
  4. Gen. 7:17
  5. Gen. 7:17
  6. II Chron 17:6
  7. John 3:14,15

The Hebrew text of v.14 reads literally: “As so many were astonished at you ...” which is the rendering preserved by *The New King James Version*. In view of the use of the third person in the rest of the sentence, this does not seem to make much sense, unless we see in it a note of personal attention by the Father to the Son. It is as if God wants to emphasize to Jesus Christ that this prophecy was particularly addressed to Him. *Barnes’ Notes* observes here: “A change of person here occurs which is not uncommon in the Hebrew poets. In Isa 52:13, Yahweh speaks of the Messiah in the third person; here he changes the form of the address, and speaks of him in the second person. In the following verse the mode of address is again changed, and he speaks of him again in the third person.” There are some Hebrew manuscripts that only use the third person singular in this verse.

On the whole meaning of v.14, *Barnes’ Notes* comments: “This verse is closely connected with the following, and they should be read together. The sense is, ‘as many were shocked at him-his form was so disfigured, and his visage so marred-so he shall sprinkle many nations.’ That is, the one fact would correspond with the other. The astonishment would be remarkable; the humiliation would be wonderful, and suited to attract the deepest attention; and so his success and his triumph would correspond with the depth of his humiliation and sufferings. As he had in his humiliation been subjected to the lowest condition, so that all despised him; so hereafter the highest possible reverence would be shown him. Kings and nobles would shut their mouths in his presence, and show him the profoundest veneration.”

The Apostle Paul elaborates the theme of Jesus’ humiliation and exaltation in his statement: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult for us to imagine the horror of flogging and crucifixion as it was practiced by the Romans in Jesus’ day. Isaiah describes it well as disfiguring to the point where human likeness disappeared. As a result of this immense suffering Jesus’ blood atones for the sins of the world. The Hebrew word for “sprinkle” in the verse “so will he sprinkle many nations,” is *nazah*, which refers to the ceremonial sprinkling in Old Testament worship. We find it in the verse: “And take some of the blood on the altar and some of the anointing oil and *sprinkle* it on Aaron and his garments and on his sons and their garments.” According to a footnote in *The New International Version*, *The Septuagint* reads here: “so will many nations marvel at him.”

The chapter ends with the remarkable statement that the nations and their leaders (kings) will see and understand what, until then, had been hidden from them. The universal problem of mankind is sin. None of the world religions give an answer that solves man’s dilemma. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims that the Lamb of God has taken away the sins of the world. This message must be preached worldwide. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’”<sup>2</sup>

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1. Phil. 2:5-11

2. Rom. 10:9-15

But we are facing the fact that the Gospel has not reached the ends of the earth yet, even though the Lord Jesus Christ made His second coming conditional to it. “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”<sup>1</sup> Many nations that have been “sprinkled” are either unaware of the fact or have rejected the message. The time will come that everyone on earth will come to the recognition of this truth. “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.”<sup>2</sup>

The Apostle Paul touches upon this mystery when he writes to the Corinthians: “We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’— but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

*Barnes’ Notes* observes here: “In this part of the verse a reason is given for the veneration which kings would evince. It is, that they should receive intelligence of this wonderful exaltation of the messenger of God which had not before been made known to them as it had been to the Jews. Or, in other words, the great mystery of the incarnation and redemption would contain truths and wonders which they had not contemplated elsewhere. No such events would have occurred within the range of their observation; and the wonders of redemption would stand by themselves as unparalleled in all that they had heard or seen. What is here predicted has been fulfilled. The mystery of the incarnation and the atonement; the sufferings and the death of the Redeemer; his exaltation and his glory, are events which are unparalleled in the history of the world. They are events suited in their nature to excite the profoundest admiration, and to induce kings and nobles to lay their hand on their mouth in token of veneration. No monarch on earth could have evinced such condescension as did the Son of God; none has been elevated to so high a rank in the universe as the Redeemer. That the Son of God should become a man; that his visage should be so disfigured by grief as to have scarcely the aspect of a human being; that he should suffer and die as he did; and that he should be exalted as he is over this whole world, and have the most elevated place in the universe at the right hand of God, are all events suited to excite the profoundest admiration.”

Isaiah 53 is one of the greatest chapters in all of Scripture. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, “Polycarp the Lysian calls this chapter ‘the golden passionate of the Old Testament evangelist.’ ” Others have called it “the holy of holies of Old Testament prophecy.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, gives it the heading “The man who is God: suffering observed but misunderstood.”

The opening verse seems to indicate that the lack of understanding of the nations of this world is more a matter of unbelief than a lack of information. But here Isaiah turns his eye from the world in general to the nation of Israel in particular. The Apostle John followed Isaiah’s gaze when he wrote: “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”<sup>4</sup> No one among the Jews of Jesus’ day understood what His coming was all about or believed what He said about Himself; not even His own disciples. Jesus had stated clearly: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”<sup>5</sup> He also said: “The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”<sup>6</sup> The two men on their way to Emmaus expressed the general opinion of

1. Matt. 24:14
2. Rev. 1:7
3. I Cor. 2:6-10
4. John 1:10,11
5. Matt. 20:28

Jesus' followers when they said to "the stranger" they met on the road: "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place."<sup>1</sup>

The horror of Jesus' suffering and death seemed to be so contrary to everything the Good News ought to be like that nobody understood what was happening. Everyone believed that Jesus had failed; even Satan thought he had won when the Messiah died. But the heel the serpent struck crushed his head.<sup>2</sup> No one had ever won a battle by dying.

In v.1 the "message" and "revelation" are used as parallels. The message is about God's revelation of salvation, which is given in the image of God's arm.

The Bible uses the finger, the hand and the arm of God as symbols of various acts of God: acts of creation, provision and deliverance. Although this is not done consistently, a certain pattern can be observed. The finger of God points to creation, as in: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place..."<sup>3</sup> It was also the finger of God that wrote the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone: "When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God."<sup>4</sup> The hand of God provides substance to His creation: "You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing."<sup>5</sup> But it is also the instrument of judgment, as in the case of the Egyptian plagues. We read: "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ' 'This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: ' 'Let my people go, so that they may worship me.' ' If you refuse to let them go and continue to hold them back, the hand of the LORD will bring a terrible plague on your livestock in the field — on your horses and donkeys and camels and on your cattle and sheep and goats.' "<sup>6</sup> The arm of God is symbolic in Scripture of the power that effects deliverance. We read this, for example, in the verse: "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.' "<sup>7</sup>

The revelation of God's arm is like the flexing of God's muscle in the fight against Satan and his evil. The unbelievable aspect of this revelation is that God gains the victory, not by a demonstration of superior power, but by weakness which we would judge as inferior. It is by the foolishness of the cross, in the suffering and death of the Messiah, that the one who holds the power of death is destroyed.<sup>8</sup> It is this amazing feat that makes God's revelation so unbelievable. It not only defies human logic, it mocks wisdom, both human and demonic. If God conquers in His weakness, what will happen when He demonstrates His strength!

There seems to be some tension in the expectations about the appearance of the Messiah between vv.2 and 3. The "tender shoot," *yowneq* in Hebrew, literally means "a sucker," or "a twig of a felled tree that is sprouting out again." This is the only place where that particular word is found in Scripture. Isaiah had earlier prophesied: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit,"<sup>9</sup>

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- 6. Mark 9:31
  - 1. Luke 24:19-21
  - 2. See Gen. 3:15.
  - 3. Ps. 8:3
  - 4. Ex. 31:18
  - 5. Ps. 145:16
  - 6. Ex. 9:1-3
  
  - 7. Ex. 6:6
  - 8. See Heb. 2:14.

but different words are used there. The idea of a sucker on a plant is that it does not belong there. Gardeners usually remove them. The dry ground from which it grows does not feed expectations either. The whole tendency of the text seems to be is that the revelation of God's redeeming power does not come in the way we would expect it. Christ was not born in a palace but in a stable. The king of the universe had to flee for His life. He settled in an obscure town and never received any higher education. "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" does not only speak of what Jesus looked like after being scourged and during His crucifixion; it applies to the life He lived during the thirty some years prior to that moment. God's glory was so well disguised that, apart from the few moments of His transfiguration, nobody saw it. The Apostle John wrote: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth,"<sup>1</sup> but that was written long after His resurrection and ascension.

Yet, the shoot represents life where no life was expected. He appeared, as *The Pulpit Commentary* puts it, "Either out of the 'dry ground' of a corrupt age and nation, or out of the arid soil of humanity."

About the words "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "It is scarcely the prophet's intention to describe the personal appearance of our Lord. What he means is that 'the Servant' would have no splendid surroundings, no regal pomp nor splendor — nothing about him to attract men's eyes, or make them think him anything extraordinary. It is impossible to suppose that there was not in his appearance something of winning grace and quiet majesty, but it was of a kind that was not adapted to draw the gaze of the multitude."

V.3 depicts the Messiah as "a man of sorrows" and familiar with suffering because He was despised and rejected by men. The Hebrew title "Man of sorrows" is *`iysh mak'ob*. This "sorrow" is the pain of identification, as in the verse where God says to Moses: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering."<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word, rendered "despise" is *bazah*. We read about Esau that he despised his birthright when he traded it for some bread and some lentil stew.<sup>3</sup> Rejected is *chadel* in Hebrew, which literally means: "vacant," or "desitute." We find it in the verse "Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how *fleeting* is my life."<sup>4</sup> The only other time that word is used is in Ezekiel where God says to the prophet: "But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' Whoever will listen let him listen, and whoever will *refuse* let him *refuse*; for they are a rebellious house."<sup>5</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on "a man of sorrows": "Sorrows makes a 'domino' link between verses 3 and 4, and it is only in 4 that we discover that his sorrows and suffering arose not from a sickly constitution but because he took our sorrow as his own. *Esteemed* is an 'accounting' word, a reckoning up of value. They saw ordinariness (2), the world would call him an 'unfortunate' (3b), so they did not choose to follow him (3a) but turned from him (3c). They appraised what they saw and added it up to nothing (3d)."

It was not only Israel and the world that rejected the Messiah because they felt He was worthless, but God Himself rejected and cursed Him when Jesus took upon Himself the filth and stench of our sin. This made Him cry out on the cross "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"<sup>6</sup>

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9. Isa. 11:1

1. John 1:14

2. Ex. 3:7

3. See Gen. 25:34.

4. Ps. 39:4

5. Ezek. 3:27

The Messiah's despicability is born of the fact that He identified with our sin. Looking at Him we see an unveiled demonstration of the filth and decay of our own heart. That which we are so careful to hide under a thick layer of respectability is openly exposed in Him. Seeing Him, we see ourselves, that self we do not want to be seen. It is often when we recognize our own sin in other people that we begin to hate them.

Our salvation will always consist in our identification with Him who identified with us. It is the recognition that we deserve the punishment that He undergoes that brings God's forgiving grace into our lives and initiates holy transformation. We can handle Jesus when we believe that He received from God what He deserved. The problem begins when we are asked to recognize that He received the punishment we ought to have received. God forgives us when we plead guilty. This has been depicted in several illustrations. Billy Graham once told the story of being fined for speeding. He appeared in court and the judge sentenced him to pay the fine. Then the judge pulled out his wallet and paid it for Billy. Another example is that during the imprisonment of Chuck Colson, who was involved in the Watergate scandal during the Nixon regime, some of Colson's friends found a law that would allow someone else to finish his prison term for him. But ours is a case of capital offence. And even if this would be allowed under the law, we never saw an example of a person taking the death penalty for someone else's offence. Yet, that is what Jesus did for us. On our part we must confess that we are guilty of a capital crime. If we consider ourselves dead with Him, He will make us participate in His resurrection.

The Hebrew word *nasa'*, "to lift," is used to describe the ceremony of the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement: "The goat will *carry* on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert."<sup>1</sup> When John, the Baptist saw Jesus coming he said: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"<sup>2</sup> But the Lamb will not be able to take away the sins that have not been put on Him. Those who insist in carrying their own sin into their grave will bear full responsibility for what they owe.

*Barnes' Notes* brings out the problems this passage had for those who read Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah. We read: "The Chaldee has given a singular paraphrase of it, showing how confused was the view of the whole passage in the mind of that interpreter. 'And he shall build the house of the sanctuary which was defiled on account of our sins, and which was delivered on account of our iniquities. And in his doctrine, peace shall be multiplied to us. And when we obey his words, our sins shall be remitted to us.' The Syriac renders it in a remarkable manner, 'He is slain on account of our sins,' thus showing that it was a common belief that the Messiah would be violently put to death."

The verb in "He was pierced" is *chalal*, which literally means: "to bore." It also suggests profanity. In the act of crucifixion the image of God in man was totally profaned. Those who were crucified were considered to be the lowest of the low, the rubbish of this world. Isaiah used the same word earlier in the verse: "Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who *pierced* that monster through?"<sup>3</sup> The same thought can be conveyed in English if "to cut" is used in the sense of "to cut down someone."

The ritual of the covenant of peace is illustrated in the way God promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit that land. We read that God said to Abraham: " 'Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.' Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates — the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.' "<sup>4</sup> The normal procedure

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6. Matt. 27:46

1. Lev. 16:22

2. John 1:29

3. Isa. 51:9

4. Gen. 15:9,10,17-21

was that both parties would walk in between the pieces of cut up animals to indicate that they would be cut into pieces if they did not keep the covenant. In Abraham's case, only God passed between the pieces. The same is the case in the piece treaty God makes with us. It is certified by the cutting up of the Messiah.

*Barnes' Notes* observes: "The proper idea is the weal or wound made by bruising; the mark designated by us when we speak of its being 'black and blue.' It is not a flesh wound; it does not draw blood; but the blood and other tumors are collected under the skin. The obvious and natural idea conveyed by the word here is, that the individual referred to would be subjected to some treatment that would cause such a weal or stripe; that is, that he would be beaten, or scourged. How literally this was applicable to the Lord Jesus, it is unnecessary to attempt to prove (see Matt. 27:26). It may be remarked here, that this could not be mere conjecture. How could Isaiah, seven hundred years before it occurred, conjecture that the Messiah would be scourged and bruised? It is this particularity of prediction, compared with the literal fulfillment, which furnishes the fullest demonstration that the prophet was inspired. In the prediction nothing is vague and general. All is particular and minute, as if he saw what was done, and the description is as minutely accurate as if he was describing what was actually occurring before his eyes."

What would be done to the Messiah was acted out symbolically by two goats on the Day of Atonement. We read: "From the Israelite community [Aaron] is to take two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the LORD at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. He is to cast lots for the two goats — one lot for the LORD and the other for the scapegoat. Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as a scapegoat. He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull's blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites — all their sins — and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert."<sup>1</sup> For obvious reasons two animals were needed to carry out what the Messiah would do as one single person. The goat that was killed could not physically carry the people's sin into the desert, but the Messiah could both die, carry away the sin of mankind and enter the sanctuary with His own blood. He even acted as a high priest in putting the whole load of the world's sin upon Himself. The difference is in the resurrection.

The Hebrew text is actually more gripping than any translation can convey because the verbs "have" and "are" are not used. It reads literally: "But he ... wounded for our transgressions, ... bruised for our iniquities, ... the chastisement for our peace ... upon Him; with His stripes ... healing for us." We can almost hear in this staccato language the blows of the hammer that nailed Jesus to the cross.

Isaiah describes the triple agency that effected the atonement in the same way as three creatures were involved in the ritual of the Day of Atonement. The high priest would take the two goats and perform the double sacrament of sacrifice on the altar and of sending away; one goat would give its life at that very moment and be burned on the altar, the other would die a slow death in carrying the sin to the desert. Isaiah says: "He took up ... and carried;" "He was pierced, he was crushed," "The LORD has laid on him." The first He did Himself, the second man did to Him, and the third the LORD did.

All three Persons of the Holy Trinity are involved in this ultimate single sacrifice for the sins of the world. The Apostle John states: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."<sup>2</sup> And the Apostle Paul writes: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for

1. Lev. 16:5, 6-10, 15, 16, 21,22

2. I John 4:10

us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”<sup>1</sup> And in Hebrews we read: “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”<sup>2</sup>

In these three verses, Isaiah also shows the effect the suffering of the Messiah has upon those in whose place He took the punishment. The cause of His suffering was our infirmities and our sorrows. “Suffering” is the translation of the Hebrew word *choliy*, which refers to a physical ailment, as in the verse: “The LORD will keep you free from every *disease*. He will not inflict on you the horrible diseases you knew in Egypt, but he will inflict them on all who hate you.”<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word *mak’ob* refers to the emotional impact physical pain may have upon us. It can be translated “anguish” or “affliction.” We find the word in Solomon’s prayer for the dedication of the temple: “and when a prayer or plea is made by any of your people Israel — each one aware of his *afflictions* and pains, and spreading out his hands toward this temple— then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive, and deal with each man according to all he does, since you know his heart (for you alone know the hearts of men).”<sup>4</sup>

The fact that the Messiah’s suffering was a substitution for our sins was not initially recognized. Our human reaction is that God punished Him because He had done something to displease Him. The thought that one person’s love could bring him to the point of wanting to die for someone else cannot enter an evil mind. Sinful minds project their corrupt thoughts upon others. It takes love to recognize love. But because of this loving act of substitution what is evil for Him becomes good for us. The result of His payment for our transgression is peace for us. The Hebrew word *pesha`* stands for “a revolt.” Jesus died to end our rebellion against God. This officially ends the war and brings about peace as a legal condition. The experience of peace in the heart is the result of this legal status.

Thirdly, our going astray is the result of our sinful nature. V.6 is the verdict that condemns all of humanity. In breaking away from God, the first human being represented the whole human race. As a head of a state declares war on another state, which brings all the citizens of that state in a state of war with those of the other state, so Adam declared war on God for all of us. Even if we did not personally make the declaration, we all act as if we are in a state of war with God. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”<sup>5</sup> We act out our personal war in our acts of rebellion. Our sinful nature makes us all into sinners who practice sin on a daily basis. Sheep lose their way because that is the nature of the beast. The Hebrew word *ta`ah* means: “to stray.” Job describes the mindset, using the same word: “He deprives the leaders of the earth of their reason; he sends them *wandering* through a trackless waste. They grope in darkness with no light; he *makes* them *stagger* like drunkards.”<sup>6</sup> We are like sheep in that we will lose our way if left alone. *Barnes’ Notes* quotes Calvin, who commented on “We all, like sheep, have gone astray”: “In order that he might more deeply impress on the minds of people the benefits derived from the death of Christ, he shows how necessary was that healing of which he had just made mention. There is here an elegant antithesis. For in ourselves we were scattered; in Christ we are collected together; by nature we wander, and are driven headlong toward destruction; in Christ we find the way by which we are led to the gate of life.”

The Psalmist illustrates this well in the picture of the people who had lost their way in the desert. “Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle. Let them give

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1. II Cor. 5:21
  2. Heb. 9:14
  3. Deut. 7:15
  4. II Chron. 6:29,30
  5. Rom. 3:23
  6. Job 12:24,25

thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.”<sup>1</sup>

Commenting on these verses, *Matthew Henry's Commentary* states: “He had wounds and stripes. He was scourged, not under the merciful restriction of the Jewish law, which allowed not above forty stripes to be given to the worst of malefactors, but according to the usage of the Romans. And his scourging, doubtless, was the more severe because Pilate intended it as an equivalent for his crucifixion, and yet it proved a preface to it. He was wounded in his hands, and feet, and side. Though it was so ordered that not a bone of him should be broken, yet he had scarcely in any part a whole skin (however fond we are to sleep in one, even when we are called out to suffer for him), but from the crown of his head, which was crowned with thorns, to the soles of his feet, which were nailed to the cross, nothing appeared but wounds and bruises. Hereby we have healing; for by his stripes we are healed. Sin is not only a crime, for which we were condemned to die and which Christ purchased for us the pardon of, but it is a disease, which tends directly to the death of our souls and which Christ provided for the cure of. By his stripes (that is, the sufferings he underwent) he purchased for us the Spirit and grace of God to mortify our corruptions, which are the distempers of our souls, and to put our souls in a good state of health, that they may be fit to serve God and prepared to enjoy him. And by the doctrine of Christ's cross, and the powerful arguments it furnishes us with against sin, the dominion of sin is broken in us and we are fortified against that which feeds the disease.”

Jesus came into this world as the only human being ever born, who fully knew the purpose for which He came. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”<sup>2</sup> He walked the straight and narrow path up to the point where God put the load of the world's sin upon Him and He was forced to wander into the desert of life like the scapegoat. He cried: “ ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ - which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ ”<sup>3</sup> In reality He had forsaken God in His identification with us.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: “Verses 4–6 have already established that we are to think of the Servant's death in terms laid down in the Levitical sacrifices. The point here is the contrast between the silence of ignorance and the silence of deliberate self-submission. Yet a great principle of the sacrificial system is involved. Verses 4–6 first established our sinfulness (4–5), and then revealed it as our common folly (6a) and our individual culpable choice (6b). This is to say, sin involves the will. But this is precisely the point at which animals can only picture the substitute we require and cannot actually be that substitute: they have no consciousness of what is afoot nor of any deliberate, personal, self-submissive consent to it. Ultimately only a Person can substitute for people. This is the importance of the stress in verse 7 on the Servant's voluntariness expressed in the acceptance of humiliation and the deliberately maintained silence.”

The two words that describe the humiliation of the Messiah in v.7 are “oppressed” and “afflicted.” The Hebrew words are *nagas* and *`anah*. Both words have given problems of interpretation as is demonstrated in a variety of translations of the text. *Nagas* has the meaning of harassment or tyranny. We find it in the verse: “The LORD said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their *slave drivers*, and I am concerned about their suffering.’ ”<sup>4</sup> And also in “At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts. This is how it is to be done: Every creditor shall cancel the loan he has made to his fellow Israelite. He shall not *require payment* from his fellow Israelite or brother, because the LORD's time for canceling debts has been proclaimed.”<sup>5</sup> *`Anah* conveys the idea of being looked down upon and consequently being mistreated. We find it in the verse: “Then Sarai *mistreated* Hagar; so she fled from her.”<sup>6</sup> The overriding thought seems to be that the honor that is due to a person as

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1. Ps. 107:4-9
  2. Matt. 20:28
  3. Matt. 27:46
  4. Ex. 3:7
  5. Deut. 15:1,2

bearer of the image of God is being withheld. Man is being treated as an inferior species, on a lower level than animals of the lowest rank. Those who mistreated the Messiah did not realize that a person who despises a fellow human being lowers himself. Only animals treat others like animals.

V.7 describes the “Via Dolorosa,” the path Jesus traveled from Gabbatha to Golgotha “like a lamb.” He, who knew all the awful details of what would happen to Him, led the way as a dumb animal that does not know the difference between being sheared or slain. In His case it was not a lack of understanding but of complete surrender. He fulfilled literally and fully what David prophesied about Him: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’”<sup>1</sup> He may have quoted these words as He went.

The opening chorus of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* features a boys’ choir that sings the hymn: “O innocent Lamb of God slaughtered on the wood of the cross.” Simultaneously, two four-voice choirs sing the wail of the daughters of Zion who see the Bridegroom being led away to His death. This ocean of sound ends in the words “carrying the wood of the cross as a Lamb!”

That which reduces us to stunned silence is the fact that this happened to the Lord of the universe, the Creator of heaven and earth, God Almighty Himself. In His glorious humility He exposed our despicable arrogance.

The Apostle Peter uses Jesus’ silence as an example for us to follow in circumstances of affliction. We read: “For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”<sup>2</sup> The Greek text actually read for “this is commendable before God,” “this is grace before God.”

The literal reading of the Hebrew text of v.8 is: “He was taken from prison and from judgment and who shall declare His generation? For He was cut off out of the land of the living: He was stricken for the transgression of my people.”

The Hebrew word *’otser*, here translated “oppression,” only occurs three times in the Bible. It has the triple meaning of “barren,” “oppression,” or “prison.” We find all three meaning used, as in Isaiah’s text and in: “Then their numbers decreased, and they were humbled by *oppression*, calamity and sorrow.”<sup>3</sup> And in Proverbs: “There are three things that are never satisfied, four that never say, ‘Enough!’: the grave, the *barren* womb, land, which is never satisfied with water, and fire, which never says, ‘Enough!’”<sup>4</sup>

The first line of v.8 is easier to comprehend than the second. The Messiah was arrested and condemned to death. But what do we make of the words: “And who can speak of his descendants?” The Hebrew reads literally: “And who shall declare His generation?” The Hebrew word rendered “speak” is *siyach*, which has the meaning of “to ponder,” or “to meditate.” This is the only instance in Isaiah where this verb is used. Translators have struggled to make sense of this, as is evident from different translations. *The New King James Version* reads: “And who will declare His generation?” *The New American Standard Bible*: “And as for His generation, who considered?” *The New Living Translation* takes more liberty of interpretation with: “But who among the people realized that he was dying for their sins?” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes about *Who can speak of his descendants*: “A very free rendering, meaning that the Servant

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6. Gen. 16:6  
 1. Ps. 40:6-8  
 2. I Peter 2:19-23  
 3. Ps. 107:39  
 4. Prov. 30:15,16

was cut off in his prime, leaving no family – as does (presumably) ‘Who will declare his generation?’ (NKJV). But better is ‘Who of his generation considered ... (NIV mg.), *i.e.* to his sufferings was added the pain of total lack of sympathetic understanding from those around.’ It is obvious that the meaning is obscure and that the different interpretations amount to different guesses.

*Barnes’ Notes* states: “This phrase has been very variously interpreted; and it is by no means easy to fix its exact meaning. Some have supposed that it refers to the fact that when a prisoner was about to be led forth to death, a crier made proclamation calling on anyone to come forward and assert his innocence, and declare his manner of life. But there is not sufficient proof that this was done among the Jews, and there is no evidence that it was done in the case of the Lord Jesus. Nor would this interpretation exactly express the sense of the Hebrew.”

The commentary proceeds to quote several schools of opinion, among which Luther and Calvin, who translated the phrase: “Who will declare the length of his life?” It adds: “Calvin, however, does not refer it to the personal life of the Messiah, so to speak, but to his life in the church, or to the perpetuity of his life and principles in the church which he redeemed. His words are: ‘Yet we are to remember that the prophet does not speak only of the person of Christ, but embraces the whole body of the church, which ought never to be separated from Christ. We have, therefore, says he, a distinguished testimony respecting the perpetuity of the church. For as Christ lives for ever, so he will not suffer his kingdom to perish’ ”

Other translations are: “Who of his contemporaries will consider it?” or “Who of his contemporaries considered that he was taken out of the land of the living on account of the sin of my people?” *Barnes* says: “Others render it, ‘Who can express his posterity, the number of his descendants?’ ” And finally, the same commentary states: “Some of the fathers referred it to the humanity of Christ, and to his miraculous conception. This was the belief of Chrysostom ... But the word is never used in this sense. The word *dowr* (generation), means properly an age, a generation of human beings; the revolving period or circle of human life; from *duwr*, a circle (Deut 23:3-4,9; Eccl 1:4). It then means, also, a dwelling, a habitation (Ps 49:20; Isa 38:12). It occurs often in the Old Testament, and is in all other instances translated ‘generation,’ or ‘generations.’ Amidst the variety of interpretations which have been proposed, it is perhaps not possible to determine with any considerable degree of certainty what is the true sense of the passage. The only light, it seems to me, which can be thrown on it, is to be derived from the 10th verse, where it is said, ‘He shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days;’ and this would lead us to suppose that the sense is, that he would have a posterity which no one would be able to enumerate, or declare. According to this, the sense would be, ‘He shall be indeed cut off out of the land of the living. But his name, his race shall not be extinct. Notwithstanding this, his generation, race, posterity, shall be so numerous that no one shall be able to declare it.’ This interpretation is not quite satisfactory, but it has more probabilities in its favor than any other.”

The Hebrew verb, translated “cut off” is *gazar*, meaning: “to cut down or off,” but it has the added meaning of a decision. The first time the verb is used in Scripture is in the famous first court case in which King Solomon had to decide on the two prostitutes and the two babies, one dead and one alive. “He then gave an order: ‘Cut the living child in two and give half to one and half to the other.’ ”<sup>1</sup> Eliphaz uses the verb in his speech to Job, saying: “What you *decide* on will be done, and light will shine on your ways.”<sup>2</sup> The suggestion is that the Messiah’s death was not an unforeseen tragedy, but was the result of God’s eternal decree.

Another word that is pregnant with meaning is *nega`*, translated “stricken.” It can mean “a blow,” but also “a leper.” There is a suggestion of punishment for sin in it and as such we find it in the context in which it is first used in the Bible. “But the LORD inflicted serious *diseases* on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram’s wife Sarai.”<sup>3</sup> And also in Leviticus where it is used in the context of the diagnoses of

1. I Kings 3:25
2. Job 22:28
3. Gen. 12:17

leprosy: “When anyone has a swelling or a rash or a bright spot on his skin that may become *an infectious skin disease*, he must be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons who is a priest.”<sup>1</sup>

A footnote in *The New International Version* gives an alternate reading of v.8 as: “Yet who of his generation considered | that he was cut off from the land of the living | for the transgression of my people, | to whom the blow was due?”

V.9 describes the burial of Christ in amazing detail. As one who died by crucifixion, it was expected that Jesus’ body would be disposed of in an unceremonious way by putting him in a hole in the ground and simply covering him with dirt. That this did not happen was due to the intervention of Joseph of Arimathaea, who had the body of Jesus interred in his own new grave. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: “*Wicked ... rich*: the former is plural and the latter singular. If Isaiah had merely intended the contrast between a shameful and a sumptuous burial he would have used two singulars. The use of a plural and a singular suggests that he is talking not about categories but about actual individuals. He offers no explanation, nor is there one until the fulfillment: Matthew alone of the Gospels specifies that Joseph of Arimathaea was ‘rich’ (27:37; cf. Mk. 15:43; Lk. 23:50); John brings out the contrast between the expected (19:31) and the actual (19:38ff.) burial of Jesus. But as Isaiah foretold, ‘His burial was appointed with wicked men but (he was) with the rich man in his death.’ ” *The Living Bible* gives the interesting paraphrase: “He was buried like a criminal, but in a rich man’s grave.”

The second part of v.9 gives the reason for this unexpected reversal. The Hebrew text reads “because,” rather than “though” used by *The New International Version*. God exonerated His Son by giving Him a decent burial. Once He accomplished the task of atonement to the point where He could say: “It is finished,”<sup>2</sup> His humiliation was ended also. As the perfect Man, Jesus never committed a crime or sinned in any other way; He never told anything but the truth.

In introducing the last verses of this chapter as “The Servant triumphant,” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “Isaiah does not use the word ‘resurrection,’ but these verses display the Servant ‘alive after his suffering’ (Acts 1:3). Not, however, alive in the usual Old Testament sense that the dead possess the half-life of Sheol. There could not be a greater contrast than between the vainglorious of the erstwhile king of 14:9–12 and this majestic one. The dead (9) is alive (10), the condemned (8) is righteous (11), the helpless (7) is victor (12).”

Commenting on v.10 alone, the commentary continues: “This verse begins and ends on the topic of *the LORD’s will ... the will of the LORD*. The Lord accomplished his will through his Servant’s suffering (10a); the Servant lives to prosper what the Lord has done. Or, to put it another way: the Servant’s suffering achieved salvation; the Servant is now the Executor of the salvation he achieved. The Lord was the architect of his suffering; he lives to apply its achievements.”

The Hebrew text reads literally: “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him.” The Hebrew word used is *chaphets*, which means: “to be pleased with.” We find it in the Psalms in the taunt that was also used during the crucifixion: “He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he *delights* in him.”<sup>3</sup> *Barnes’ Notes* comments here: “The LORD was ‘pleased’ with his sufferings, not because he has delight in the sufferings of innocence; not because the sufferer was in any sense guilty or ill-deserving; and not because he was at any time displeased or dissatisfied with what the Mediator did, or taught. But it was: 1. Because the Messiah had voluntarily submitted himself to those sorrows which were necessary to show the evil of sin; and in view of the great object to be gained, the eternal redemption of his people, he was pleased that he would subject himself to so great sorrows to save them. He was pleased with the end in view, and with all that was necessary in order that the end might be secured. 2. Because these sufferings would tend to illustrate the divine perfections, and show the justice and mercy of God. The gift of a Savior, such as he was, evinced boundless benevolence; his sufferings in behalf of the guilty showed the

1. Lev. 13:2
2. John 19:30
3. Ps. 22:8

holiness of his nature and law; and all demonstrated that he was at the same time disposed to save, and yet resolved that no one should be saved by dishonoring his law, or without expiation for the evil which had been done by sin. 3. Because these sorrows would result in the pardon and recovery of an innumerable multitude of lost sinners, and in their eternal happiness and salvation. The whole work was one of benevolence, and Yahweh was pleased with it as a work of pure and disinterested love.”

Jesus explains in John’s Gospel the reason for God’s pleasure in His death, saying: “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father — and I lay down my life for the sheep. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life — only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a greater contrast than between the horror of Jesus’ suffering and death and the way Jesus Himself spoke about it. To some Greek tourists who wanted to meet Him, Jesus said: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me. Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!’ ”<sup>2</sup> And only a few hours before His death, He prayed in front of His disciples: “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus never looked at the suffering but always at the resurrection that lay beyond. The author of *Hebrews* suggests that we take Jesus’ attitude to suffering as an example, saying: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”<sup>4</sup>

The sin offering in v.10 is not a payment for an intentional act of sin, but a means of purification of guilt incurred by the pollution of sin that is around. The Hebrew word is *‘asham*. In *Leviticus*, it is used as a means of expiation of unintentional sin. We read: “Or if he touches human uncleanness — anything that would make him unclean — even though he is unaware of it, when he learns of it he will be guilty. When anyone is guilty in any of these ways, he must confess in what way he has sinned and, as a penalty for the sin he has committed, he must bring to the LORD a female lamb or goat from the flock as a *sin offering*; and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.”<sup>5</sup> This sacrifice describes perfectly the way Jesus took our sin upon Himself. He was not guilty because of any sinful act He committed personally, but He became our sin by association. When a person leans against a fence that has been freshly painted, he will get paint on his clothing, whether he is aware of it or not. This illustrates the way Jesus became sin for us. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on the sin offering: “The *guilt offering* is found in Leviticus 5:1 – 6:7. The heart of its distinctiveness is its insistence on minute exactness between sin and remedy. It could well be called the ‘satisfaction-offering.’ It is used here not so much to affirm that the Servant bore and discharged the guiltiness of our sin, but that what he did is exactly equivalent to what needed to be done.”

Jesus did more than “prolong his days.” When Jesus died as a grain of wheat in the ground, He produced an eternal harvest. The Hebrew word used for “prolong” is *‘arak*, which can be translated “to outlive.” We find it in the verse: “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may *live long* in the land the LORD your God is giving you.”<sup>6</sup> Canaan, being the place of God’s rest, was meant to be an image of

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1. John 10:14,15,17,18
  2. John 12:23-28
  3. John 17:1
  4. Heb. 12:2
  5. Lev. 5:3,5,6
  6. Ex. 20:12

eternal life. Jesus expressed this best in what He said to the Apostle John: “I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”<sup>1</sup> The prolongation of His life is the glory that made the Apostle John fall as dead before the risen Christ. And the will of God which was prospered by Jesus’ obedience is that by His suffering He leads many sons to glory.<sup>2</sup>

*Barnes’ Notes* comments on the words “and be satisfied” in v.11: “That is, evidently, he shall be permitted to see so much fruit of his labors and sorrows as to be an ample recompense for all that he has done. It is not improbable that the image here is taken from a farmer who labors in preparing his soil for the seed, and who waits for the harvest; and who, when he sees the rich and yellow field of grain in autumn, or the wagon heavily laden with sheaves, is abundantly satisfied for what he has done. He has pleasure in the contemplation of his labor, and of the result; and he does not regret the wearisome days and the deep anxiety with which he made preparation for the harvest. So with the Redeemer. There will be rich and most ample results for all that he has done. And when he shall look on the multitude that shall be saved; when he shall see the true religion spreading over the world; when he shall behold an immense host which no man can number gathered into heaven; and when he shall witness the glory that shall result to God from all that he has done, he shall see enough to be an ample compensation for all that he has endured, and he shall look on his work and its glorious results with pleasure. We may remark here that this implies that great and most glorious results will come out of this work. The salvation of a large portion of the race, of multitudes which no man can number, will be necessary to be any suitable remuneration for the sufferings of the Son of God. We may be assured that he will be ‘satisfied,’ only when multitudes are saved; and it is, therefore, morally certain that a large portion of the race, taken as a whole, will enter into heaven. Hitherto the number has been small. The great masses have rejected him, and have been lost. But there are brighter times before the church and the world. The pure gospel of the Redeemer is yet to spread around the globe, and it is yet to become, and to be for ages, the religion of the world. Age after age is to roll on when all shall know him and obey him; and in those future times, what immense multitudes shall enter into heaven! So that it may yet be seen, that the number of those who will be lost from the whole human family, compared with those who will be saved, will be no greater in proportion than the criminals in a well-organized community who are imprisoned are, compared with the number of obedient, virtuous, and peaceful citizens.” It is difficult to ascertain how much closer or farther away we are at present from the dream Mr. Barnes dreamed over a century ago.

Mr. Barnes’ image of the farmer who looks at his harvest field agrees with Jesus’ own words to His disciples at the conversion of the Samaritans: “Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”<sup>3</sup> And the satisfaction Isaiah describes here in regard to Christ’s emotions after His suffering also rings through in Jesus’ words of comfort to His disciples, in preparing them for the way they would experience His crucifixion and death. He said to them: “A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.”<sup>4</sup>

The second part of v.11, “by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities” contains some intriguing statements. A footnote in *The New International Version* reads: “Or by knowledge of him.” That alternate reading may make more sense in the light of the words in Jesus’ last prayer with His disciples before His crucifixion: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know

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1. Rev. 1:18
  2. See Heb. 2:10.
  3. John 4:35-38
  4. John 16:21

you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”<sup>1</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* comments on this phrase: “i.e. ‘by his knowledge of the Divine counsels and purpose, which he will impart to his disciples, shall my righteous Servant justify many’ (literally, *the many*), or, in other words, ‘turn them from sin to righteousness’ (comp. ... Daniel 12:3). Nothing is so effectual in turning men to righteousness as teaching them the true knowledge of God — his nature, his purposes with regard to them, his feelings towards them. Christ, from his own knowledge, gave men this knowledge, and so did all that could be done to draw them to his Father. And his efforts were not without result. The fruit of his teaching has been the justification of many — ay, of ‘the many,’ as both Isaiah and St. Paul (...Romans 5:19) testify.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, believes that it means, “He knows exactly what is required in order to save sinners.”

Unless we believe that Isaiah jumps back and forth in time, the words “and he will bear their iniquities” are not part of His suffering before His death when “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (v.6b). This must refer to the Messiah’s present representation in heaven, where His presence assures our salvation and pardon. The Apostle John speaks of this in his epistle, saying: “But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”<sup>2</sup> And the author of *Hebrews* confirms the same, saying: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”<sup>3</sup>

V.12 has caused some problems of interpretation. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “*Among the great ... with the strong* cannot be correct. It cannot be that this Servant who will ‘prosper’ with a threefold exaltation (52:13), before whom kings are stunned into silence (52:14), who is alive from the dead and the Executor of the Lord’s plans (53:10) will, in the event, share the supreme place with any other. In the light of this, a closer glance at the Hebrew yields, ‘Therefore I will apportion to him the many’ (cf., again, Jn. 6:37), ‘and the strong he will apportion as spoil.’ ” The last reference is to the verse “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.” The Hebrew words translated “great” and “strong” are *rab*, which refers to quantity, and *atsuwum*, meaning “powerful,” in the sense of being numerous. According to *Barnes’ Notes, the Septuagint* reads: “Therefore he shall inherit many.” *The Living Bible’s* paraphrase, probably, renders best the intent of the verse with: “Therefore, I will give him the honors of one who is mighty and great because he has poured out his soul unto death.”

In the phrase “He poured out his life unto death,” the Hebrew word used is *nephesh*, “soul.” According to *Leviticus*: “the life of a creature is in the blood.”<sup>4</sup> The same word *nephesh* is used here. We conclude from this that Isaiah speaks here about the blood of Christ that was poured out in His death on the cross, when He hung between two criminals.

The last part of v.12 does in fact look back to the Messiah’s suffering and death as a reason for His exaltation. Luke reports that Jesus prayed for those who nailed Him on the cross, saying: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”<sup>5</sup> Part of this last statement, however, applies also to the present, since our high priest makes intercession for us in heaven. *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes here: “Every word stands here as if written beneath the cross on Golgotha. And this is the case with the clause before us, which was fulfilled (though not exclusively) in the prayer of the crucified Savior: ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34).”

To deduct from the statement “he bore the sin of many” that Christ only died for those God had elected to save, as Calvin did, ignores other parts of Scripture that testify to the fact that the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world. Inasmuch as Jesus then and now does not make intercession for every

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1. John 17:3
  2. I John 2:1,2
  3. Heb. 7:25
  4. See Lev. 17:11.
  5. Luke 23:34

individual, but only for those who want to be identified with Him in His death and resurrection, so the effect of His atoning death is not applied to every individual either. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would lay the sin of all the people on the two goats that would effectuate the atonement, but in the case of an individual sinner, the person who sinned had to put his hands on the head of the sacrificial animal that took his place and confess his sins, laying them upon the victim. We read in *Leviticus*: "He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him."<sup>1</sup> As the old hymn writer sang: "I lay my sins on Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God. He bears them all, and frees us from the accursed load. I bring my guilt to Jesus, to wash my crimson stains while in His blood most precious, till not a spot remains."<sup>2</sup>

ii. The great invitation (54:1–55:13)

**1** *"Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband," says the LORD.*

**2** *"Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.*

**3** *For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities.*

**4** *"Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.*

**5** *For your Maker is your husband — the LORD Almighty is his name — the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth.*

**6** *The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit — a wife who married young, only to be rejected," says your God.*

**7** *"For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back.*

**8** *In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your Redeemer.*

**9** *"To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again.*

**10** *Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.*

**11** *"O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires.*

**12** *I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones.*

**13** *All your sons will be taught by the LORD, and great will be your children's peace.*

**14** *In righteousness you will be established: Tyranny will be far from you; you will have nothing to fear. Terror will be far removed; it will not come near you.*

**15** *If anyone does attack you, it will not be my doing; whoever attacks you will surrender to you.*

**16** *"See, it is I who created the blacksmith who fans the coals into flame and forges a weapon fit for its work. And it is I who have created the destroyer to work havoc;*

**17** *no weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and this is their vindication from me," declares the LORD.*

**Chapter 55:1** *"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.*

1. Lev. 1:4

2. Words of hymn by Horatius Bonar.

**2** *Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.*

**3** *Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.*

**4** *See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples.*

**5** *Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor."*

**6** *Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.*

**7** *Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.*

**8** *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.*

**9** *"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

**10** *As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,*

**11** *so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

**12** *You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.*

**13** *Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed."*

By way of general introduction to this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, writes: "Like its predecessors, the final Servant passage is followed by a 'tailpiece,' which, as befits its dignity, takes up two chapters. In 54:1 the invitation to *sing* – to enter with joy into a provided benefit – goes out to a *barren woman*, who turns out to be Zion (11–15). In 55:1 a worldwide invitation to the feast goes out to all who desire to come and eat freely, and this is seen as the fulfillment of the promise that David will rule the world (3–4). Thus chapters 54 – 55 match 40:1 – 42:17, where the message of comfort to Zion merged into a vision of world blessing."

Motyer entitles chapter 54, "Zion restored: five pictures of benefit." Those five pictures are given the heading: (1) 1–3, Worldwide increase: the barren woman and the spreading family; (2) 4–8, Security in God: the solitary wife and the everlasting love; (3) 9–10, The end of wrath: Noah and the covenant of peace; (4) 11–14, Untouchable security: the city of truth and righteousness; (5) 15–17, Protected statues: the Creator and his servants. The commentary continues: "Humanity falls into two groups: those who possess the revelation of God (whether they live conformably to it or not), and the rest who are still to be brought within the circle of privilege. When the Servant has performed his great work of salvation (52:13 – 53:12), the first invitation goes out to those already within the Lord's sphere, so that they may enter freely (*sing*, 1) into the benefits of what the Servant has done."

**(1) 1–3, Worldwide increase: the barren woman and the spreading family.**

The Hebrew word *`aqar* means: sterile; it is used in the Old Testament exclusively for people who are unable to have children as in: "Now Sarai was *barren*; she had no children."<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word *chuwl*, which is rendered "in labor," literally means: "to twist or whirl." In Scripture it is rarely used of labor pains, but rather in the sense of being anxious. We find it the first time in a verse about Noah: "He *waited* seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth."<sup>2</sup> And

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1. Gen. 11:30

2. Gen. 8:10,11

also in: “This very day I will begin to put the terror and fear of you on all the nations under heaven. They will hear reports of you and will tremble and *be in anguish* because of you.”<sup>1</sup>

The Apostle Paul quotes Isaiah in a section that deals with the difference between the law and grace. He compares the two dispensations to Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael, Jerusalem on earth and the New Jerusalem in heaven, the old Israel and the church as the bride of Christ. We read: “Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: ‘Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.’ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.”<sup>2</sup>

The exhortation “sing” is comparable to the earlier solace “Comfort, comfort my people.”<sup>3</sup> The words are addressed to the remnant of a nation that was earlier compared in numbers to the stars in heaven and the sand on seashore. They evidently refer to Judah in captivity. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes here: “Israel in captivity is addressed as ‘barren,’ because, in the time of suffering, her numbers rather diminished than increased. Still, she is bidden to ‘sing’ on account of the prospect that is opening upon her. She that is now desolate and solitary will soon have more children than she formerly had, when she was a married wife, enjoying the fellowship of Jehovah, her Husband (ver. 5). The ‘children’ spoken of are in part those who gathered themselves together in Jerusalem and the adjacent territory after the issue of the decree of Cyrus (...1 Chronicles 9:2-34; ...Ezra 2:1-65; 8:1-20; ...Nehemiah 7:6-72; 11:3-36), but mainly such as flocked in from the Gentiles, both before and after Christ’s coming (see ver. 3).”

For a woman in Israel to be barren was considered to be a matter of shame. When Elisabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, became pregnant, she said: “The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”<sup>4</sup>

The Hebrew, rendered “desolate,” is *shamem*, meaning: “to devastate.” We find it in the verse: “I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be *deserted*.”<sup>5</sup> An intriguing part of Isaiah’s statement is the mention of the husband. The barren woman is the one who has no husband, which suggests that her own barrenness is not the reason for the absence of children, or at least not merely. There may be an allusion to the way the Messiah was born into this world. When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would be pregnant, we read: “ ‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’ The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.’ ”<sup>6</sup>

Another interesting feature is the mention, in v.2, of the tent that has to be enlarged to accommodate the phenomenal growth. Tents symbolize transience; they are for people who are on the move. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, suggests: “*Tent* life (2) pictures an ‘ideal’ relationship between the Lord and his people (Je. 2:1–3); cf. 16:5, where the Messiah reigns ‘in the tent of David.’ ” The reference in Jeremiah reads: “The word of the LORD came to me: ‘Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: ‘ ‘I remember the

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1. Deut. 2:25
  2. Gal. 4:21-28
  3. Isa. 40:1
  4. Luke 1:25
  5. Lev. 26:22
  6. Luke 1:34,35

devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest; all who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them,' ' declares the LORD." There may be another reference to the coming of the Messiah in the use of the word "tent." John's Gospel declares: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."<sup>1</sup> The Greek word used there for "made his dwelling" is *skenoo*, which means: "to tent."

The language becomes even more fascinating in v.3, where the spreading out of the tent influences the rest of the world and becomes a symbol of victory. This is expressed in the word "dispossess." The Hebrew word used here is *yarash*, which means: "to occupy by driving out previous tenants, and possessing in their place." But it also has the added meaning "to inherit." As such it occurs in the verse in which Abram says to God: "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my *heir*."<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, in this context the cities of the Gentiles are called "desolate." The victory of those who have been comforted by God, who sing because of the blessing they received, will fill the lives of the desolate with meaning and joy. This is the victory of the Gospel that changes human lives. "The meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace."<sup>3</sup> And: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."<sup>4</sup>

**(2) 4–8, Security in God: the solitary wife and the everlasting love.**

V.4 opens with "Do not be afraid." The Hebrew reads literally "fear not." This fear focuses on shame, disgrace and humiliation. The Hebrew words are respectively *buwsh*, meaning: "to pale," *kalam*, "to wound emotionally," and *chapher*, which has the meaning of embarrassment for reasons of being "found out." The difference between *buwsh* and *chapher* seems to be that the first is an inward feeling and the second the humiliation of exposure. The picture is of a girl or a woman who has gone through the pain of a broken relationship, either by being abandoned by her husband or by his death. Both would give a feeling of rejection. The word "widowhood" is particularly intriguing. It suggests that the Servant of Israel whose suffering and death was described in previous chapters was the husband. In New Testament terms it means that the church became the bride of Christ through His death. The death of Jesus Christ was the most shameful form of death a person can die. But in taking this death upon Himself, Jesus took away our shame.

There is something of the prophet Hosea in the images Isaiah projects here of the promiscuous wife. Israel did have the shame of her youth to deal with; her infidelity in going after the idols of other nations created embarrassment when God called her back. But God does not remember the sins of our youth. In the words of Micah: "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."<sup>5</sup>

The fourfold title of God, expounded in v.5, reveals the glory of the new relationship to which Israel, and in her the church, is called. God reveals Himself as the Creator, not only of the universe, but particularly of Israel. He is *Yahweh tsabaa'owt*, the LORD of hosts. He is the *ga'al* or *go'el*, the kinsman-redeemer, who pays the price to set us free, the God of the whole earth. The picture of the greatness of God makes this relationship into the best marriage imaginable. It is like the marriage of a poor girl to a millionaire. The great miracle of our salvation is in the fact that, in order to make us rich, Jesus Christ became poor. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."<sup>6</sup>

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1. John 1:14
  2. Gen. 15:3
  3. Ps. 37:11
  4. Matt. 5:5
  5. Mic. 7:18,19
  6. II Cor. 8:9

In v.4 we have the impression that it was the husband who left his wife because he was unfaithful. V.5 indicates that the unfaithfulness was the wife's. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "The two pictures of *widowhood* (4) and *a wife deserted* (6) could suggest, respectively, a dead and an unfaithful husband, and thus create a wholly wrong set of impressions. Isaiah is prepared to risk this in order to make us feel as sharply as possible the deadly results of sin and, correspondingly, the joyful results of salvation."

Isaiah describes God's deep inner turmoil over Judah in the same terms as Hosea did in regard to the Northern kingdom of Israel. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man — the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath."<sup>1</sup> It may be hard for us to imagine that God would have conflicting feelings like a human being. But if we understand what it means that we are created in His image, we must accept that our emotions are a reflection of His. Yet, as the Apostle Paul says: "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself."<sup>2</sup> The eternal conflict between God's demand of justice and His love found its solution in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. That is the reason God continuously calls back sinners to Himself.

**(3) 9–10, *The end of wrath: Noah and the covenant of peace.***

In these verses we see the rainbow of God's promise appear in the clouds of God's wrath. The reminder is both to God and to man. God, of course, never needs to be reminded of anything, because the Omniscient cannot forget. The truth is expressed in terms that humans can understand. The flood of Noah was the ultimate expression of God's wrath. God promised that it would never be repeated until the death of His Son. We read in the Genesis account after the flood: "Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: 'I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you — the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you — every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.' And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.' So God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.'"<sup>3</sup>

Isaiah's prophecy was given more than one century before the Babylonian captivity. It was meant for those who experienced this captivity and for the remnant of what once Israel was. It is ultimately meant for us who live on the other side of the cross.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, remarks here: "This poetic meditation on the flood takes up the 'surge of anger' theme (6) from the last picture. The pledge that *the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth* (Gn. 9:12–17) was linked to the hanging up of the Lord's war-bow (the translation 'rainbow' is contextual; the word is that for a fighting bow): the war is over, the weapon has become a sign of peace, indeed a covenant sign, a visible pledge of the Lord's promise, an incitement to trust the Promise-maker. So also now there is the pledge *not to be angry ... to rebuke*. The former is the outburst of exasperation (the same word as in 8); the latter is the mental attitude lying behind such an outburst, a sense of being offended. Both in emotion and in expression — *i.e.* totally — wrath is gone. For Noah, a stable ordinance of creation became the guarantee of peace with God, but Isaiah goes further: even should creation lose its stable permanence with *mountains* (10) shaking and *hills* (lit.) 'tottering,' there is a *covenant* that cannot (lit.) 'totter.' The Servant

1. Hos. 11:8,9
2. II Tim. 2:13
3. Gen. 9:8-17

bore the punishment that made peace (53:5)) and now that peace is a covenanted reality, more steadfast than the cosmic fabric and rooted in the divine *compassion* (see 7–8). The emotion of anger is gone for ever but the emotion of surging love abides.”

Jesus predicted huge earthquakes as signs of the beginning of the end times. We read: “There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.”<sup>1</sup> Isaiah’s prophecy may be pointing to this. The shaking of the mountains and hills may stand for a whole complex of natural disasters, some of which we have experienced in our present age. But God’s lovingkindness, His *cheched*, that is His covenant love, the love that binds us to Him as by a marriage vow, will never be subject to any change or shaking.

God’s compassion is the unshakable guarantee of the stability of His relationship with us. The Hebrew word used is *racham*, which refers to the mother’s womb and expresses the tenderness a woman has for her child. We find it used in the verse: “As a father has *compassion* on his children, so the LORD has *compassion* on those who fear him.”<sup>2</sup> As a Father, God loves us with a motherly love.

**(4) 11–14, Untouchable security: the city of truth and righteousness.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: “The city theme is fundamental in Isaiah: the Davidic city (1:26–27); the world city (2:2–4); the cleansed city (4:2–6); the joyous city (12:1–6); the ‘tale of two cities’ (24–26) – one deserted (24:10), the other redeemed, universal and strong (25:1–9; 26:1–3); another ‘tale of two cities’ (47–52) – one fallen (47:1), the other raised (52:1); the comforted city (66:10ff.). In the first two pictures in this series (54:1–3, 4–8), desolate Zion represented the Lord’s privileged people in their need of the blessings the Servant achieved. In the final two pictures (54:11–15, 16–17), the city represents beauty and security. Note how this makes *the covenant of peace* (9–10) the center of the whole series.”

It is difficult to read Isaiah’s description of the city and not think of the New Jerusalem the Apostle John describes in Revelation: “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.”<sup>3</sup>

What Isaiah describes is the bride of the Lamb, the church of Jesus Christ, consisting of Israelite and Gentile believers. The building material used is the souls of human beings and their value is greater than any earthly treasure. Its glory is the glory of God.

The difference between the New Jerusalem and the old is in the knowledge and understanding of its inhabitants. If the glory of the New Jerusalem is caused by the fact that her “sons will be taught by the LORD” (v.13), the affliction of the old city must be due to the fact that the sons had not yet learned the lesson. The teacher is the Holy Spirit, as Jesus said to His disciples: “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”<sup>4</sup>

The Hebrew word for “righteousness” is *tsedaqah*, which stands for both a status and an action. It is the word that describes Abraham’s status with God in “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him

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1. Matt. 24:7,8

2. Ps. 103:13

3. Rev. 21:9-11, 18-21

4. John 14:26

as *righteousness*.”<sup>1</sup> It is also the practical outworking of this status, as in: “For I have chosen [Abraham], so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by *doing what is right* and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”<sup>2</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: “The community which [the city] encloses enjoys a relationship with the Lord in the light of his truth (13a) and on the ground of his righteousness (14a), and a total peace: peace with God (13b) and peace from earthly disturbance (14b–e). *Taught is limmuwdim*, as in 50:4ad. Like the Servant they are disciples, instructed in the word of God. The gift of revealed truth has always marked off the Lord’s people from all others. It was the distinguishing mark of the city of 2:2–4. Jeremiah 31:34 predicts the identical blessing, and offers no other explanation of it than that it is the fruit of a full and final dealing with sin; so also in Isaiah, the perfect work of redemption brings the redeemed into the central privilege of being taught divine truth by a divine teacher. The outward beauty, then, of *precious stones* (12) is matched by the inner possession of the truth (13); the hidden reality of *foundation* (11c) is matched by the secret ingredient of divine *righteousness* (14a), the blessing bestowed by the Servant who ‘provides righteousness’ (53:11) for the many he designed to save.” The reference in Jeremiah reads: “ ‘No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘ ‘Know the LORD,’ ’ ‘ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the LORD. ‘For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.’ ”

**(5) 15–17, Protected statues: the Creator and his servants.**

V.15 suggests that there were instances in which enemies attacked Judah as part of God’s plan for them. That stage is past now. Ironically, these words were uttered before the Babylonian captivity had occurred. What Isaiah prophesies here pertains to the future, after the matter of sin has been dealt with in a total and conclusive way. This is the condition of which the Apostle Paul says: “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”<sup>3</sup> Paul also says about this kind of eternal security: “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”<sup>4</sup>

The attacks against God’s people are depicted in terms of physical warfare and emotional suffering. The blacksmith was the one who manufactured the swords, the arrows and the spears, the weapons used in the war against Israel. We may get the impression that “the destroyer to work havoc” is the power that subdues the blacksmith, but that is not the meaning of the Hebrew words used. The Hebrew text speaks about “the waster to destroy.” The words are *shachath* and *chabal*, which both carry the meaning of “decay.” We find *shachath* in the verse “Now the earth was *corrupt* in God’s sight and was full of violence.”<sup>5</sup> And *chabal* in “We *have acted very wickedly* toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.”<sup>6</sup> So both the blacksmith and the destroyer are agents of attack against the righteous. The one does physical harm the other emotional. We find the latter in Zechariah’s vision of Israel’s high priest, Joshua. “Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The LORD said to Satan, ‘The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?’ ”<sup>7</sup>

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1. Gen. 15:6
  2. Gen. 18:19
  3. Rom. 8:37
  4. Rom. 8:31-34
  5. Gen. 6:11
  6. Neh. 1:7

The physical danger to which the righteous are exposed has as yet not been eliminated. Jesus warns us that we may still lose our life in the process. He said: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”<sup>1</sup> He also said: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”<sup>2</sup> But we do have the protection where it ultimately counts, before God.

Isaiah calls this “the heritage of the servants of the LORD.” The Hebrew word *nachalah* is used of the properties assigned to the Israelites in the Canaan, the Promised Land. The word is used in the verse: “Then Boaz said, ‘On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also buy it from Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to perpetuate the name of the dead through his *inheritance*.’”<sup>3</sup> This is the heritage of righteousness, which is the word translated “vindication” by *The New International Version*. But *tsedaqah* rather means righteous. The Apostle Peter elaborates on this heritage: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”

This brings us to the last great chapter in this section. In his introduction to this chapter, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, gives it the title: “The whole world invited into the new world.” He makes the following subdivisions: (1) 1–2, Free provision for every need, (2) 3–5, Co-equal citizenship, (3) 6–9, The fundamental issue, (4) 10–11, The sure word, (5) 12–13, The promise of a new world.

**(1) 1–2, Free provision for every need.**

Motyer states: “In contrast to the particular command to Zion to ‘sing’ (54:1), the great invitation (lit.) ‘O [not “Come”] all you who are thirsty’ brings before us the worldwide consequences of the Servant’s work, namely that he was designated to establish ‘justice [revealed truth] on earth’ (42:4) and to be ‘my salvation to the ends of the earth’ (49:6). What, then, does saving work in 52: 13 – 52:12 offer to the whole world?”

It is difficult to imagine a more impassioned plea than the invitation with which this chapter opens. The Hebrew word *howy* is more often used in a negative context, in which it means “alas,” or “woe.” Here it expresses the intensity of love and compassion God feels for a lost world. We read about Jesus: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”<sup>4</sup>

On the physical level water is the most urgent need of the human body. We can do without food for several days, but a lack of water for an extended period is life threatening. Spiritually, the need is of even greater urgency. The sons of Korah express this eloquently in “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?”<sup>5</sup> As David does in “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”<sup>6</sup> Unquenched spiritual thirst is even more devastating than physical thirst, because it has eternal consequences.

In most cases water is free, but wine and milk cost money. In places where pure drinking water is scarce, wine and milk is often also beyond the reach of people. However important the meeting of our physical needs on this point may be, the satisfaction of the soul surpasses it all. This is richly illustrated in

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7. Zech. 3:1,2
  1. Matt. 10:28
  2. John 16:33
  3. Ruth 4:5 (*New King James Version*)
  4. Matt. 9:36
  5. Ps. 42:1,2
  6. Ps. 63:1

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. By asking her for water, the Lord invites her to partake of that which is the ultimate thirst quencher. We read: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water. Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."<sup>1</sup> The same principle applies to other nourishment. We must all learn that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."<sup>2</sup> In the same context of the encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus said to His disciples: "I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food ... is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."<sup>3</sup>

The irony of life on earth is that people consider money the most important issue in life, while the things we need most cannot be bought with money. In Jesus' words: "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"<sup>4</sup>

God invites us all to come and get the most urgent necessities of life without any charge. *Barnes' Notes* states: "It is impossible to conceive of language more universal in its nature than this; and while this stands in the Word of God, the invitation may be made to all, and should be made to all, and must be made to all. It proves that provision is made for all. Can God invite to a salvation which has not been provided? Can he ask a man to partake of a banquet which has no existence? Can he ask a man to drink of waters when there are none? Can he tantalize the hopes and mock the miseries of people by inviting them to enter a heaven where they would be unwelcome, or to dwell in mansions which have never been provided?"

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on vv.1,2: "The contrasting promises of *waters* to drink and *the richest of fares* (2d) to *eat* embraces every need and necessary supply. The first invitation, *Come to the waters*, underlines a life-threatening need and an abundant supply. The second invitation, *come, buy and eat*, extended to the one who has *no money*, highlights inability and helplessness: on the one hand, how can one without money *buy*? But, on the other hand, nothing can be had without payment (*buy*). Someone – in context, by implication, the Servant is saving efficacy – has paid the purchase price. The third invitation, *Come, buy wine and milk, without money*, stresses the riches of the provision: not just the water of bare necessity but the wine and milk of luxurious satisfaction. Isaiah has already pictured the idolater, pouring out gold and silver (46:6) in order to 'feed on ashes' (44:20). The antidote to such a lack of discernment (44:19; cf. 40:18–20, 25), mental delusion (44:20) and pointless labor (44:12) – what exposure of religion without revelation! – is to *listen, listen* (lit. 'listen listeningly'): to give full attention to listening and do nothing else at all, to give full and undivided attention to the word of God. It is in this way that the ashes of false religion are replaced by *the richest of fare*."

The word that describes in full the content of these verses is "grace." Idolatry is expensive; God's gift of salvation is free. Yet, in a way, God's grace is more expensive than the service of idols; it costs us all. For the salvation of our soul we have to hand over to God, not only all we have, but also all we are! Jesus said: "What can a man give in exchange for his soul?"<sup>5</sup> But Jesus also said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."<sup>6</sup>

**(2) 3–5, Co-equal citizenship.**

The Hebrew text reads literally: "Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, [even] the sure mercies of David." The Hebrew word

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1. John 4:10, 13,14
  2. Deut. 8:3
  3. John 4:32,34
  4. Matt. 16:26
  5. Matt. 16:26
  6. Matt. 16:24,25

rendered “mercies,” or “faithful love” in *The New International Version*, is *chesed*, which the covenant love of God.

As was observed above, the key to satisfaction is in hearing the Word of God. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, explains about God’s promise to David: “The benefits covenanted here (lit.) ‘the trustworthy love’ promised to David. Psalm 89 is the key text explaining this expression: 89:1 announces the theme, (lit.) ‘the loves of the Lord,’ which finds expression in ‘a covenant for David’ (3); 89:49 concludes the psalm by appealing for the enactment of these great ‘loves.’ The body of the psalm explains why the plural is used: the Lord’s ‘loves’ for David are, first the love (28) promising David an enduring kingship (28–37). Into this world kingdom, and under the sway of this enduring king, come all who respond to the invitation.”

For the sake of clarity we copy the verses of Ps. 89 referred to above:  
 “A maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite. I will sing of the LORD’s great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations (1). You said, ‘I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant (3), I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure. If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness. I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered. Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness — and I will not lie to David — that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky’ ” (28-37).

Vv.4 and 5 reveal the purpose of God’s covenant with David as executed by the One of whom David was a type. The Messiah is the real “Man after God’s own heart.”<sup>2</sup> He will be “a witness ... a leader and commander of the peoples.” Note that “peoples” is plural. As a witness, He will not only testify the truth but He will embody it. As Jesus said to His disciples on the eve of His crucifixion: “I am the way and *the truth* and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>3</sup>

As a leader, He sets the example. Jesus Christ was the only human being who lived on earth in the way the Father intended man to live. His greatest example was evinced in the way He dealt with sin, suffering and death. In the words of the Apostle Peter: “How is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”<sup>4</sup>

As a commander, Jesus will exercise the ultimate authority that has been given to Him in His resurrection from the dead. In introducing the great commission to evangelize the world, Jesus said: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”<sup>5</sup>

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1. Rom. 10:17
  2. See I Sam 13:14.
  3. John 14:6
  4. I Peter 2:20-24
  5. Matt. 28:18-20

Those who bow to the Messiah's authority do the summoning of the nations. The word "summon" may be too strong a translation of the Hebrew word *qara'*, which has rather the meaning of addressing a person or call him by name. We find its first use in the verse: "God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night.' And there was evening, and there was morning — the first day."<sup>1</sup>

**(3) 6–9, The fundamental issue.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: "The key to entering upon sure and lasting blessing is the simple 'Come ... come ... come ... listen, listen ... Give ear and come to me' (1–3). What is involved in this simple coming? (a) A recognition of urgency while the day of opportunity lasts (6); (b) an acknowledgment and renunciation of sin (7ab) and a return to the God of compassion and pardon (7cd); and (c) a submission of whatever we think or do to what the Lord thinks and does (8–9)."

There is no contradiction between the limitations imposed upon God's presence in v.6 and God's omnipresence, which is an eternal divine attribute. God is always everywhere; as David states in one of his Psalms: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you."<sup>2</sup> God is even in hell, but man's condition in hell makes Him inaccessible.

In the same way, the human heart may not always be in the "seek-mode" that is necessary for finding. There must be a condition of sincerity and truth in us to find God. "The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth."<sup>3</sup> There are certain conditions we must meet in order to experience God's omnipresence.

V.7 specifies the conditions needed to come to the moment of truth: conviction of sin and turning to God in repentance. A sense of God's presence is needed, however, for us to come under conviction. It was when Isaiah saw the Lord "high and exalted," that he cried: "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."<sup>4</sup> Without the working of the Holy Spirit there will never be any conviction of sin.<sup>5</sup>

What the balance is between God's working upon our heart and our decision to draw near to Him is difficult to determine. It ought to be enough for us to know that we have a part to play and a decision to act upon. As far as time is concerned, according to the Apostle Paul, there is no time but the present. We read: "As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, 'In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."

The statement about the difference between God's thoughts and human thinking must be seen in connection with God's willingness to forgive freely. It is very difficult for us to forgive our fellowmen who have done us harm. When someone hurts us we want revenge. We tend to project this tendency of ours upon God, believing that He has the same problem forgiving us as we do in regard to other people. Grace means that God is willing to forgive us for everything we think about Him and every harm we have tried to inflict upon Him. This does not mean that God is not hurt by our sin. It hurts Him to the point of death, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Here also we find a paradox. At the conclusion of the Lord's Prayer, after the prayer "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors," Jesus states: "For if you forgive men when they sin against

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1. Gen. 1:5
  2. Ps. 139:7-12
  3. Ps. 145:18
  4. Isa. 6:1,5
  5. See John 16:8

you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”<sup>1</sup> There is a way in which God’s forgiveness of our sins is unconditional. The Lamb of God has carried away the sins of the world. But unless we apply the pardon we receive upon our relationships with our fellowmen, the effect of our own forgiveness, and especially the experience of grace, will never be a reality to us. And in the parable of the man who was forgiven a debt of ten thousand talents, who refused to forgive the man who owed him a hundred dinarii,<sup>2</sup> the same principle is expounded.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: “This is a verse of very wide application, covering every aspect of life. It cancels the useless and debilitating question ‘Why?’ in face of life’s difficulties; it opens the door to the blessed reality of faith in a God who is truly God. In context its focus is narrower. People would give many different answers if questioned about the nature of their need and to what sort of banquet they would like free access in order to meet that need. But the Lord is thinking his own thoughts and pursuing his own road when he meets the moral and spiritual need (spelled out in 6–7). If the words *not ... neither* seem stark in expressing this distinction between our thoughts and the Lord’s, this is no more than is just. How much *higher* (9) is heaven? The answer is ‘immeasurably.’ In relation to any who questions the Lord, this comparison cultivates a due humility. In relation to the point at issue – moral and spiritual plight – we see the wonder of repentance if it can indeed bridge and cancel such a gap, and how marvelous is the Lord’s remedy.”

If the power of all human thinking could be combined into one enormous think tank, and the genius of all thought could be concentrated on one point, it would not equal or even come near the thoughts of God who created the human brain. Yet, human arrogance allows itself to stand in judgment over the things God thinks and does. “My thoughts are not your thoughts” sounds like the understatement of eternity.

**(4) 10–11, *The sure word.***

Vv.10 and 11 serve as an illustration of the comparison between God’s thought and human thought and God’s Word and man’s word. Human speech is, at best, an expression of thought and emotion. Most words do not even come up to that level. God’s Word is the instrument of creation, the very source of our own existence. “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.”<sup>3</sup>

Precipitation is presented as one of God’s servants, almost in the same way as the angels. In some of the Psalms snow and clouds are depicted as entities with personality capable of praising the Creator. In one of them we read, for instance: “Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding...”<sup>4</sup> The same kind of personality is attributed to the Word of God and that with much more authority. We learn in the New Testament that God speaks to us in the Messiah. We read in Hebrews: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.”<sup>5</sup> And the Gospel of John narrows it down to the point of saying: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.”<sup>6</sup>

Some Bible scholars see even more in the images than a mere comparison between one of God’s agents and the other. *Barnes’ Notes*, for instance states: “The meaning of this verse and the following is plain. This refers evidently, as the whole passage does, to the times which should succeed the coming of the Messiah. The hearts of people by nature are what the earth would be without the rains of heaven-barren and

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1. See Matt 6:12,14,15.
  2. Matt.18:23-35
  3. Ps. 33:6,9
  4. Ps. 148:7,8
  5. Heb. 1:1,2
  6. John 1:1,2

sterile. But God says that his truth shall certainly accomplish an effect similar to that produced by descending showers. The rain never descends in vain. It makes the earth fertile, beautiful, and lovely. So would it be with his truth in the moral world. The comparison of truth with descending rain or dews is exceedingly beautiful, and occurs not infrequently in the Bible.”

Although Barnes may push the analogy farther than seems warranted, the comparison between God’s creation in the physical realm and in the spiritual is often made in Scripture. The Apostle Paul writes: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> We need the Word of God as the earth needs water to produce a harvest. There is also in these verses a reminder that “man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”<sup>2</sup>

**(5) 12–13, *The promise of a new world.***

The context of this chapter makes clear that what is said about the creative power of the Word of God will find its application in the bringing back of Israel out of Babylonian captivity. “You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace” is a prediction of this return. The amazing feature here is, again, that this prophecy was given more than a century before the captivity had even begun. The words seem to be meant as words of comfort for those who would be led away in the distant future. Maybe even more, if we may put it in such human terms, God wanted to comfort Himself with the thought of the return of His people in order to make the thought of their captivity more bearable. If this sounds presumptuous, we must remember the way God spoke to Abraham about what would happen to his offspring during their enslavement in Egypt. When God revealed this to Abraham it was in terms of “a thick and dreadful darkness.” We read: “As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the LORD said to him, ‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.’”<sup>3</sup> And in *The Epistle to the Hebrews* we read that Jesus, “for the joy set before him endured the cross.”<sup>4</sup>

According to this prophecy, all of nature will join in the celebration of Israel’s return from captivity. “The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.”

None of the records of this historical event bear out the fulfillment of this prophecy. The small group of returnees never gave the impression of being a victorious army returning from the battlefield. They looked like paupers coming back to the ruins of what was once a glorious city. It took them decades to even rebuild the walls of Jerusalem against great resistance and under repression. They resembled what the Apostle Paul says about the members of the church of Jesus Christ: “Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”<sup>5</sup>

This makes us think that Israel’s return from captivity was not the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy. Our captivity will end when Jesus Christ returns in glory. At that time all of nature will join in the

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1. II Cor. 4:6
  2. Deut. 8:3
  3. Gen. 15:12-16
  4. Heb. 12:2
  5. I Cor. 1:26-29

celebration. The thorns and thistles that replaced paradise after mankind fell in sin will be replaced by evergreens and myrtle trees. And that change will be eternal.

## THE BOOK OF THE CONQUEROR (56 – 66)

By way of introduction to this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, writes: “Some perspective on these chapters can be achieved through a New Testament parallel. With the birth of Jesus Christ, the promised King arrived, heir of David’s throne and dominion (Lk. 1:31–33); with his death, the saving work of the Servant was completed and acknowledged in the threefold exaltation of resurrection, ascension and heavenly enthronement (Heb. 10:12). But his kingship is, at present, publicly *incognito*, and, even though redeemed, both we and the world we live in are far from ideal. Its rulers are inadequate, frequently hostile and never free from sin. There are also, still active, the world rulers of this darkness (Eph. 6:12). In brief, the King is reigning, the work of salvation has been done, but the world is in an interim, awaiting the day when foes will submit (Heb. 10:13), every knee bow (Phil 2:9–11) and his people become like him because they see him as he is (1 Jn. 3:2).

Historically and politically, Isaiah has reached the point where, thanks to Cyrus, the people have returned from Babylon (48:20–21), and it is to this situation that he now turns his prophetic powers. He has alerted them to the fact that they will return as they went. Prior to the exile the House of David was an empty husk. Ahaz had sold his sovereignty to the Assyrians and his successors were but puppet kings. Isaiah foresaw (45:9–13; 46:8–13) that it would be a point of contention with the exiles that, on their return, they would still be beholden to a pagan emperor – no David, no Davidic throne – and therefore, in principle, under the same sort of inadequate, self-seeking local rulers as in pre-exile Jerusalem. All the royal promises (9:1–6; 11:1–9; 32:1–8; 33:17–24) are true but await realization. Furthermore, the returning people were warned that ‘there is no peace for the wicked’ (48:22). Political blessing is one thing, spiritual transformation another, so that, like us, even those who ‘fain would serve Thee best/ Are conscious most of wrong within.’<sup>1</sup>

In drawing this parallel between the Christian’s situation and Israel’s situation in 539 BC, we have in fact offered a fair summary of the themes of Isaiah 56 – 66. In the returned community, Isaiah sees a replication of the Jerusalem society he knew – and he uses pre-exilic terms to describe it. The community, under inadequate leaders (56:9–12), will be spiritually divided (57:1–2; 59:14–15; 65:11–12) with much evidence of false religion (57:3–13; 65:3–7) on the one side and a deep sense of sin (59:1–15) and of spiritual longing (64:1–2) on the other. The prophet answers this longing by encouraging great expectations: the Lord himself will intervene (59:16–19; 66:14–16) bringing healing, peace (57:15–21) and provision (65:13–16); Zion will become glorious, the focal point of all the earth (60; 62; 66:7–13, 17–24), the center of the New Creation (65:17–24). Central to all as the focal expectation and the sole Agent of the coming salvation and vengeance is a messianic figure, the anointed Conqueror (59:20–21; 61:1–3; 61:10–62:7; 63:1–6).”

### X. THE IDEAL AND THE ACTUAL: THE LORD’S NEEDY, UNDERACHIEVING PEOPLE (56:1 – 59:13)

About this section, Motyer writes: “This section falls into four parts. The vision of a worldwide inclusive ‘Sabbath-people’ (56:1–8), is balanced by the actual state of the community (56:9 – 57:21), divided, hostile, a mixture of the ‘righteous’ and compromisers. 58:1–14 returns to the theme of the Sabbath as the ideal life of the Lord’s people, and this is balanced by confessions of failure (59:1–13).”

#### a. The waiting people (56:1–8)

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1. A quotation from H. Twells, “At even, ere the sun was set.”

**1 This is what the LORD says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.**

**2 Blessed is the man who does this, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil."**

**3 Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let not any eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree."**

**4 For this is what the LORD says: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant —**

**5 to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.**

**6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant —**

**7 these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."**

**8 The Sovereign LORD declares — he who gathers the exiles of Israel: "I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered."**

*Barnes' Notes* comments on "Blessed is the man": "Hebrew, 'The blessings of the man' (see Ps 1:1). The sense is, 'happy is the man.' The word here rendered 'man' "*nowsh* usually denotes a man in humble life or in a subordinate rank, in contradistinction from '*iysh*, a man in elevated rank. As the object of the prophet here is particularly to say, that the 'stranger' and the 'eunuch' would be admitted to these privileges, it is possible that he designedly used a word denoting one in humble life. The particular blessing to which he refers is specified in Isa 56:7-8."

In order to better understand the message of these verses we have to focus on the meaning of the word Sabbath. The keeping or not keeping of the Sabbath plays a key role in the destruction of Jerusalem and in its subsequent restoration and the return from captivity. As *Adam Clarke's Commentary* observes: "The rabbis say, 'Jerusalem had never been destroyed, had not the Sabbaths been profaned in it.' " The author of *Second Chronicles* observes about the seventy-year long Babylonian captivity: "The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah."<sup>1</sup>

The first mention of the Sabbath in Scripture is in connection with the completion of creation. We read: "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done."<sup>2</sup> It was initially, before sin entered creation, an expression of God's enjoyment of creation, of the universe, of nature and of man. The introduction of sin, evidently, challenged God's rest, because we read that Jesus said to the people of His day: "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."<sup>3</sup> As soon as sin entered God began His work of restoration and the Sabbath became a memorial of what had been. The fourth of the Ten Commandments was meant to keep the memory alive: "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."<sup>4</sup>

1. II Chron. 36:21

2. Gen. 2:2,3

3. John 5:17

But the Sabbath would no longer be a day of celebration; it was a day to keep alive the memory of God's rest, of His enjoyment, of life itself. In failing to keep this commandment, a person would identify with death, which is the fruit of sin. That is why God said to Moses: "Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested."<sup>1</sup> And we read how this threat was carried out on a man who willfully broke the Sabbath: "While the Israelites were in the desert, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. Then the LORD said to Moses, 'The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp.' So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the LORD commanded Moses."<sup>2</sup>

But there was also a Sabbath rest that was to be applied to the fields in the Promised Land. We read: "The LORD said to Moses on Mount Sinai, 'Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the LORD. For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest. Whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food for you — for yourself, your manservant and maidservant, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you, as well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land. Whatever the land produces may be eaten.'"<sup>3</sup>

And: "For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove. Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed."<sup>4</sup>

There is no record in Scripture that this last commandment was ever obeyed by those who lived in the Promised Land. The double breaking of the Sabbath, failure to observe the seventh day in personal life and failure to apply the Sabbath to agricultural practices, were the ultimate cause of the seventy-year captivity, as we saw above.

Ultimately, the Sabbath rest in the Old Testament symbolizes the rest of salvation we may enjoy in our surrender to Jesus. It is the rest we experience when we accept Jesus' invitation: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."<sup>5</sup> And the author of *Hebrews* observes: "Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."<sup>6</sup>

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4. Ex. 20:8-11
  1. Ex. 31:14-17
  2. Num. 15:32-36
  3. Lev. 25:1-7
  4. Ex. 23:10-12
  5. Matt. 11:28-30
  6. Heb. 4:10

The opening words of this chapter remind us of the message John the Baptist preached, which was later taken over by Jesus: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew text reads literally: “Keep judgment and do justice.” The Hebrew word for “judgment” is *mishpat*, which means “a sentence or formal decree.” In the context it stands for the requirements of the law as God’s revealed truth. It is that which every human being knows in his heart to be right. “Justice” is the translation of the Hebrew word *tsedaqah*, which refers to the practice of *mishpat*. In the New Testament, Jesus uses the Greek equivalent in connection with the giving of alms: “Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them.”<sup>2</sup>

We must not infer here that salvation can be obtained by working for it. As J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “This is not offered as a means of salvation but as a characteristic of those awaiting salvation.”

Isaiah addressed his message, not to pagan nations who had no knowledge of God’s covenant, but to those who knew the Lord. Their relationship with God was supposed to demonstrate itself in the keeping of the Sabbath. That this was not merely a matter of following the letter of the law in abstaining from certain activities is clear from the use of the word “evil.” The person who keeps the Sabbath keeps “his hand from doing any evil.” As with circumcision, the real rite was not what was performed on the body, but on the soul. As Moses said: “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart.”<sup>3</sup> So the keeping of the Sabbath was a lifestyle that was not limited to the seventh day of the week.

God’s intent for the people of Israel was that they would be a kingdom of priests; that is that by their behavior they would be a light in this world that would draw those who lived in darkness to the knowledge of God. Their way of living ought to have been lifestyle evangelism. A rich illustration of this principle is found in the visit the queen of Sheba paid to Solomon. We read: “When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD, she was overwhelmed. She said to the king, ‘The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness.’ ”<sup>4</sup> The fact that King Solomon did not maintain this testimony throughout his life does not mean that the illustration is worthless.

It was this intended testimony Israel was supposed to have in the world that makes Isaiah look at foreigners and eunuchs. The law forbade certain people from worshipping at the same place and in the same manner as a born Israelite. We read in *Deuteronomy*: “No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD. No one born of a forbidden marriage nor any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation. No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation.”<sup>5</sup>

The eunuch’s complaint “I am only a dry tree,” refers to the thought that eternal life was expressed on earth in terms of leaving behind children who would carry on the family name after the father had died.

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1. Matt. 3:2; 4:17
  2. Matt. 6:1
  3. Deut. 30:6
  4. I Kings 10:4-9
  5. Deut. 23:1-3

The exclusion of the eunuch was not just from participating in worship rituals on earth, it barred his entrance into heaven. The words of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians can be seen as a comment on Isaiah here: “Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ (that done in the body by the hands of men)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

God’s Word to the eunuch who thought they had lost it all is that they only lost the image of eternity. Eternal life itself was still there for them to receive. Instead of a temporal name by which they were called on earth, a name the child would inherit from the father, they would receive the eternal name, the Name of the Father in heaven. Jesus confirms this in His letter to the church in Philadelphia: “Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.”<sup>2</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, explains about the foreigner: “The Old Testament was never exclusive on a nationalistic basis. Deuteronomy 23:3ff. dealt with nations requiring special disciplines but (Ex. 12:48–49) the foreigner was always in principle welcome. Again Ezra 4:1–3 and Nehemiah 2:19–20 are not jingoism but measures to preserve the distinct people. Once distinctiveness is lost there is nothing for the outsider to join!”

The Hebrew text of v.6 reads literally: “And also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the LORD, to serve him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be his servants, everyone that keeps the sabbath from polluting it, and takes hold of my covenant....”

The Hebrew word *lavah*, rendered “bind” in *The New International Version*, literally means: “to twine.” We find it the first time in Scripture in the story of Jacob’s wife, Lea: “Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, ‘Now at last my husband *will become attached* to me, because I have borne him three sons.’ So he was named Levi.”<sup>3</sup> Levi means “associated with him.”

For those who previously had been excluded, either by law or by chauvinism, the ultimate requirement was the keeping of the Sabbath. Interestingly, the mention of circumcision is lacking here. Previously, we read: “An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD’s Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you.”<sup>4</sup> In the New Testament church this became a point of serious controversy when Gentiles began to accept the Gospel. We read: “Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” And during the first church council in Jerusalem: “Some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.’ ”<sup>5</sup> The lack of this requirement in Isaiah’s text seems to be a prophecy that foreshadows the church council’s decision.

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1. Eph 2:11-18
  2. Rev. 3:12
  3. Gen. 29:34
  4. Ex. 12:48,49
  5. Acts 15:1,5

The keeping of the Sabbath then also was no longer a matter of abstaining from certain physical activity, but an entering into the rest of God. In the words of the author of Hebrews: "Anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his."<sup>1</sup>

To those the whole sacrificial service of atonement would be available for their pardon, restoration and worship. In identifying themselves with the sacrifice they brought they would ultimately see themselves as being crucified with Christ.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: "Entrance is open but not unconditional. *Bind*: there must be personal decision. *Serve ... love* (cf. Dt. 10:12, 20) are the mark of Israelite devotion. The reduplication *serve ... worship* (lit. 'be his servants') makes the same point: no more conformism but commitment to 'be his servant.' *These* (7), the formerly unprivileged (foreigner) and unwelcome (eunuch), are brought by the Lord to where he is (*mountain*), to a speaking relationship with him (*prayer*), to the ordinances which guarantee acceptance and atonement (*sacrifice ... altar*) – and all this not as a concession but a fulfillment of what *my house* was always intended to be, *for all nations*." The embedded reference to Deuteronomy reads: "And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul ... Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name."

Jesus must have had Isaiah's eighth verse in mind when He said: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."<sup>2</sup>

b. The divided people (56:9 – 57:21)

**9 Come, all you beasts of the field, come and devour, all you beasts of the forest!**

**10 Israel's watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge; they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark; they lie around and dream, they love to sleep.**

**11 They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain.**

**12 "Come," each one cries, "let me get wine! Let us drink our fill of beer! And tomorrow will be like today, or even far better."**

**Chapter 57:1 – The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil.**

**2 Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.**

**3 "But you — come here, you sons of a sorceress, you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes!**

**4 Whom are you mocking? At whom do you sneer and stick out your tongue? Are you not a brood of rebels, the offspring of liars?**

**5 You burn with lust among the oaks and under every spreading tree; you sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags.**

**6 [The idols] among the smooth stones of the ravines are your portion; they, they are your lot. Yes, to them you have poured out drink offerings and offered grain offerings. In the light of these things, should I relent?**

**7 You have made your bed on a high and lofty hill; there you went up to offer your sacrifices.**

**8 Behind your doors and your doorposts you have put your pagan symbols. Forsaking me, you uncovered your bed, you climbed into it and opened it wide; you made a pact with those whose beds you love, and you looked on their nakedness.**

**9 You went to Molech with olive oil and increased your perfumes. You sent your ambassadors far away; you descended to the grave itself!**

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1. Heb. 4:10

2. John 10:16

**10** *You were wearied by all your ways, but you would not say, 'It is hopeless.' You found renewal of your strength, and so you did not faint.*

**11** *"Whom have you so dreaded and feared that you have been false to me, and have neither remembered me nor pondered this in your hearts? Is it not because I have long been silent that you do not fear me?"*

**12** *I will expose your righteousness and your works, and they will not benefit you.*

**13** *When you cry out for help, let your collection [of idols] save you! The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away. But the man who makes me his refuge will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain."*

**14** *And it will be said: "Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people."*

**15** *For this is what the high and lofty One says — he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.*

**16** *I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me — the breath of man that I have created.*

**17** *I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways.*

**18** *I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him,*

**19** *creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. Peace, peace, to those far and near," says the LORD. "And I will heal them."*

**20** *But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud.*

**21** *"There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."*

The transition between the preceding and the present is like the disciples' move from the mount of transfiguration to the valley of demon possession.<sup>1</sup> J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, appropriately observes: "We come down with a bump from the heights of vision to the grim realities of inadequate leaders (56:9–12) and life at the ground level (57:1–21), where there is tension and worse between 'the righteous' (1) and those who have apostasized to the cults (3–13) and forgotten the Lord (11). One group is destined for peace, (2, 19), the Lord dwells with them (15) and leads them home (14); the other he abandons to what help their idols can give (13) and they know no peace (21)."

Motyer divides this section in two parts: i. The failure of the leaders (56:9–12) and ii. The prostitute's brood and the Lord's household (57:1–21).

i. The failure of the leaders (56:9–12).

Bible scholars differ in opinion about who the "beasts of the field" are. Some believe Isaiah points to the coming invasion of the Babylonians, others even go so far as to think of the Roman invasion half a millennium away. The picture is of sheep and their shepherds, people who have no heart for the herd. To be a good shepherd was a very dangerous job, as we gather from young David's testimony to King Saul. Shortly before going to fight Goliath, David testified: "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it."<sup>2</sup>

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied against the shepherds of Israel, the leaders of the people. Jeremiah said: "'Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!' declares the LORD. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: 'Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will

1. See Matt. 17:1-17.

2. I Sam. 17:34,35

bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,' declares the LORD."<sup>1</sup> And in Ezekiel, we read: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them."<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah may be referring here to the prophets of Israel, who failed to proclaim the Word of God and warn the people against the moral decline that would bring God's judgment upon them. He may also have had King Manasseh in mind under whose reign Judah reached its lowest point of degeneration. God wants leaders, whether spiritual or political, to be people who risk their lives for those they leading, as David did for his flock. The ultimate example of leadership is given by the Lord Jesus Christ, who said: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep."<sup>3</sup>

Isaiah describes the shepherds of his day as blind, meaning that they cannot see the danger that threatens the nation. The mute dogs are those who do not issue the Lord's warning and the reference to the dogs' appetite speaks of the fact that they use the flock for their own nourishment. They do it for the money. Peter's job description of what a shepherd should be, reads: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."<sup>4</sup>

Commenting on vv.10-12, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "*Watchmen ... shepherds* are the twin aspects of true leadership: to guard from coming danger and care for present needs (Ezk. 3:16–21; 33:1–9; 34:2–9). Between the picture of *watchmen* with no concern for security (10a–d) and the thoughtless *shepherds* (11c–e), Isaiah puts his finger on the cardinal sin of the ruler: insatiable self-concern (10e–11b). It would be laughable were it not tragic to read side by side *watchmen* and *blind* (10a), *dogs* and *mute* (10c). They are unqualified (*knowledge*), unmotivated (*lie around*), insatiable (*never enough*), undiscerning (*understanding*, the ability to see to the heart of a thing), improvident (*tomorrow ... better*). Life at public expense is a bottomless purse." According to Lord Acton, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." It might be better to say that it takes corrupted men to search for power for power's sake. It is ultimately the demon inside that invites the demon outside to come in. God allowed the Babylonians to invade and destroy because the enemy had already destroyed the heart of the nation.

ii. The prostitute's brood and the Lord's household (57:1–21).

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: "The apparent jumble of this passage reflects the 'mix' of life at the ground level in a secular society: the 'righteous' having a difficult time (1), people caught up in cults (3–5) and in politics (9–10). Some find God near (15) and live with a peace and confidence not experienced by all (19–21). Yet the verses are not really a jumble but a presentation: the peace enjoyed by

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1. Jer. 23:1-3
  2. Ezek. 34:1-6
  3. John 10:11-13
  4. I Peter 5:2,3

the righteous (1–2) contrasts with the lack of peace of the wicked (20–21); the prostitute and her family (3–13) contrasts with the Lord and his household (14–19).”

Most Bible scholars interpret the perishing of the righteous in v.1 to refer to their premature death. The last part of v.2, “they find rest as they lie in death” seems to leave us little choice. The Hebrew word *‘abad*, however, has the meaning of losing one’s way to the point of destruction. The first time the word is used is in the comment of Pharaoh’s ministers who warn the king: “How long will this man [Moses] be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship the LORD their God. Do you not yet realize that Egypt is ruined?”<sup>1</sup> It is also in Queen Esther’s famous statement: “I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”<sup>2</sup>

“Taken away” is the rendering of the Hebrew word *‘acaph*, which means: “to gather for any purpose.” We find it in God’s command to Noah in connection with the preparation for the coming flood: “You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and *store it away* as food for you and for them.”<sup>3</sup> It is also used in connection with the death of Abraham. “Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he *was gathered* to his people.”<sup>4</sup>

Instead of seeing in this verse a reference to a premature death, we could apply it to the first phase of the Babylonian captivity when King Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin prisoner and carried him and seven thousand Judean soldiers with him, as well as Jehoiachin’s mother, his attendants, his nobles and his officials.<sup>5</sup> Among those who were taken away were Daniel and his three friends, as well as Ezekiel.

The whole of the Babylonian captivity was indeed a kind of death. It was the death of the temple, the place of God’s revelation, symbolizing the death of the Messiah. Peter used this “death-theme” in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, when he said: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call. ... Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”<sup>6</sup> God allows us to save ourselves from the corrupt generation of which we are the fruit by identifying ourselves with the death of Christ.

Isaiah compares this kind of death to the death of idolatry as is evident from v.9: “You sent your ambassadors far away; you descended to the grave itself!” This idolatry is described in terms of adultery, which stands for an abandonment of intimacy with God. Although some forms of idolatry were accompanied by acts of sexual sin, the essence of the picture is not physical but spiritual. Every person moves ultimately in the direction of intimacy with God, or he will lose himself in being hooked to Satan.

As far as Judah was concerned this was not a mindless drifting away from God, it was a conscious choice. The people mocked God, sneered and stuck out their tongue to Him. *Barnes’ Notes* comments on v.5: “[Inflaming yourselves] Burning, that is, with lust. The whole language here is derived from adulterous intercourse. The sense is, that they were greatly addicted to idolatry, and that they used every means to increase and extend the practice of it. The Vulgate, however, renders this, ‘Who console yourselves.’ The Septuagint renders it, ‘Invoking *parakalountes* idols.’ But the proper meaning of the Hebrew word *chaamam* is, ‘to become warm; to be inflamed, or to burn as with lust.’ ”

V.5 is one of the rare places in Scripture where the pagan custom of child sacrifice is mentioned. Evidently it was practiced in Canaan before the Israelite conquest, because God warned Israel: “Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.”<sup>7</sup> The kings Ahaz and Manasseh would later set the example for all of Israel by sacrificing their own

1. Ex. 10:7

2. Est. 4:16

3. Gen. 6:21

4. Gen. 25:8

5. See II Kings 24:10-17.

6. Acts 2:38-40

sons.<sup>1</sup> Isaiah probably wrote these words during the reign of King Manasseh who practiced the abomination. The name Molech (v.9) may actually refer to the king, rather than to the idol.

V.11 digs into the question “What made you do it?” The answer is that they misinterpreted the silence of God, believing that He either did not exist or that He did not care. People have a hard time dealing with God’s silence. It was God’s silence that caused Israel to fall into idolatry shortly after they had left Egypt. “When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’”<sup>2</sup> When King Saul realized that God was no longer speaking to him, he turned to the powers of evil. This drove him to commit suicide.<sup>3</sup>

“You have been false to me,” is the translation of the Hebrew “you have lied to me.” The Hebrew word *kazab* usually means: “to lie,” but it can also refer to failure. We find it in the verse in which Balaam says about God: “God is not a man, that he should *lie*, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.”<sup>4</sup> In the only other verse where Isaiah uses the word it points to failure. “You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never *fail*.”<sup>5</sup>

*Barnes’ Notes* states: “The sense of this verse is exceedingly obscure. The design is evidently to reprove the Jews for the course which they had been pursuing in practicing idolatry, and in seeking the alliance of foreign powers. The main scope of the passage seems to be, to state that all this was proof that they did not fear God. Their conduct did not originate from any reverence for him, or any respect to his commands. And the question, ‘of whom hast thou been afraid?’ seems to mean that they had not been afraid of God. If they had had any reverence for any being or object that had led to the course which they had pursued, it was not for God. [That thou hast lied] That thou hast been false and unfaithful to God. The image is here kept up of unfaithfulness to the marriage vow (Isa 57:6-8).”

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “Unbelief is, first, groundless: what is more to be feared than the Lord (11a)? Secondly, it is sinful (11b): *been false*, ‘tell lies,’ in this case to affirm that the Lord is our God but, in practice to withhold the reverence due to him and give it to others. Thirdly, it is inexcusable (11c): to forget all the former mercies, the great acts of the Lord, and to use his name – the very thing he wished to be remembered by (Ex. 3:15) – and yet to forget him! Fourthly, it is insulting (11d): *pondered this in your hearts*, (lit.) simply ‘laid to heart,’ meaning ‘gave me a thought,’ the practical atheism of living without the Lord.”

V.12 suggests that the people believed that God would weigh their good deeds and that the balance would tip on the side of their righteousness. In a later chapter the people would come to recognize that “all [their] righteous acts are like filthy rags.”<sup>6</sup> God does not keep a ledger of credits and debits. Sin puts every human being on the debit side in His book. The fact that the moral law was balanced by a ceremonial law that required sacrificial animals to die by way of substitution, had been lost on Israel. If anyone is saved from perdition, it is by grace not by performance.

These words are spoken against the background of the Babylonian captivity. Judah’s future was that the people would be carried away and the Promised Land would be taken from them and destroyed. There would be no hiding place from that fateful future in any type of idolatry. Only those who take refuge in the Lord would “inherit the land and possess [His] holy mountain.” The others would become like chaff and be blown away together with their idols.<sup>7</sup>

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7. Lev. 18:21

1. See II Chron. 28:3; 33:5.

2. Ex. 32:1

3. See I Sam. 28:4-19; 31:4-6.

4. Num. 23:19

5. Isa. 58:11

6. Isa. 64:6

The section of vv.14-21 picks up the theme that plays through much of the book, the theme of the road home. It is “the Way of Holiness” that was announced in an earlier chapter.<sup>1</sup> It is the road upon which the righteous travel and also the way by which the Lord of glory will come, as Isaiah said earlier: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it.”<sup>2</sup> John the Baptist quoted Isaiah when he announced the coming of the Messiah: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ”<sup>3</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, calls vv.14-21 “The Lord and his family” and he states: “This passage, concerned with the Lord’s gracious care of his household, picks up and develops the thoughts implicit in verse 1–2. There the righteous move out of hostility into peace; here the opening thought is the road (home) and the concluding thought guidance into peace (18–19).”

It is obviously the Lord speaking in these verses. *The New International Version’s* rendering “And it will be said” is arbitrary. The Hebrew text leaves out the personal pronoun, only reading “And shall say.” The key thought in this section is “I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit” (v.15). The road, therefore, is the road into a person’s heart which is normally strewn with obstacles. The removal of these obstacles consists in a confession of sin. The process is clearly delineated in the ministry of John the Baptist, who preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.<sup>4</sup> Although there was a road that led the returnees from captivity back to the land of promise, the real journey was back to the Lord Himself, to the place of His revelation.

The removal of obstacles does not imply that a person is able to cleanse himself of his own sin. If this were possible there would be no question of a contrite heart and a lowly spirit. It is the discovery that we cannot cleanse ourselves that crushes our spirit.

The Hebrew word for “crushed” is *dakka*’ which literally means “make into powder.” We find it in the verse “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”<sup>5</sup> This condition of the human heart was symbolically expressed in the incense that was presented to the Lord. We read about this: “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Take fragrant spices — gum resin, onycha and galbanum — and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts, and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred. Grind some of it to powder and place it in front of the Testimony in the Tent of Meeting, where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you.’ ”<sup>6</sup> God accepts our crushed and contrite heart as a fragrance of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

We can only experience God’s healing touch if we confess being sick. It is the vision of God’s glory that will give us the feeling of being crushed, as it did Isaiah. It was when the prophet saw the Lord “high and exalted” that he cried: “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”<sup>8</sup> The glory of the Lord is emphasized in these verses because that is what makes us realize our inglorious condition, and it is eventually God’s glory that will bring about the healing of the soul.

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7. See Ps. 1:4.

1. See Isa. 35:8.

2. Isa. 40:3-5

3. Matt. 3:3

4. See Luke 3:3-6.

5. Ps. 34:18

6. Ex. 30:34-36

7. II Cor. 2:15

8. Isa. 6:1-5

V.16 gives us the reason for God's healing work in a contrite heart. *The New International Version* omits the word "for," which is in the Hebrew text. The verse reminds us of David's insight into God's grace. We read in one of his Psalms: "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust."<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah does not state how God's wrath over sin ceased to affect us. It is understood in the picture he painted of the Messiah who took our sins upon Himself.<sup>2</sup> But David draws a line from heaven to earth and another one from east to west, making the sign of the cross at the heart of which the Father's compassion for His children is revealed. Only those who are on the other side of Golgotha can understand what is being said here.

God's anger over sin is revealed for the purpose of our salvation. When Jonathan Edwards preached his sermon "Sinners in the hand of an angry God," people came to confess their sins and experienced salvation in great numbers. God's anger is not meant to crush our spirit. Sin does the crushing and God's glory does the healing.

In v.17 the mode turns from plural to singular. Not only is Israel addressed as one single person, but speaking about "man" in the previous verses, the application was general, all of mankind was included. Here the tone becomes personal, allowing us to make a personal application.

God was particularly angry at covetousness. The Hebrew word used is *betsa`*, which has the primary meaning of "plunder." It stands for all forms of dishonesty, all failure to love our neighbor as ourselves. The word was said about the sons of Samuel: "But his sons did not walk in his ways. They turned aside after *dishonest gain* and accepted bribes and perverted justice."<sup>3</sup> *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: "This covetousness *betsa`* is probably the Hebrew expression that comes closest to English 'selfishness.'" Covetousness is spawned by fear. It is when we feel threatened that we try to build walls of security around us by using money as building blocks. The author of Hebrew puts his finger on the problem when he says: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'"<sup>4</sup> Some Bible scholars intimate, on the basis of this passage, that covetousness is particularly prevalent among Jews. As if the love of money is not found among other members of the human race! The fact that Jewish intelligence made some of them climb to the top of the financial ladder does not exclude avarice among others. The Apostle Paul was speaking about Gentiles when he wrote to Timothy: "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."<sup>5</sup> If we single out the Jews for their covetousness, we must also single them out for God's healing, forgiveness and peace. Paul's statement "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"<sup>6</sup> applies to all who believe that Jesus Christ died for their sins and rose for their salvation.

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1. Ps. 103:8-14
  2. See Isa. 53.
  3. I Sam. 8:3
  4. Heb. 13:5,6
  5. I Tim. 6:10
  6. Rom. 5:1

The fact that God says: “I will heal him” means that covetousness is a sickness. We are ordered to love our neighbor as ourselves.<sup>1</sup> An intimate love relationship with God will bring about healthy inter-human relationships as well.

God never forces His healing upon anyone. It is those who mourn, who hunger and thirst for righteousness that will be comforted, filled and blessed.<sup>2</sup> “Creating praise on the lips” is the translation of the Hebrew “I create the fruit of the lips.” The author of Hebrews explains how this praise is created through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in our behalf. We read: Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess his name.”<sup>3</sup> He is the peace offering, the thank offering we bring to God.

“The wicked” in v.20 are the *rasha`*, the people who make the morally wrong choices. The first time this word is used for people is in Abraham’s prayer for Sodom: “Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the *wicked*?”<sup>4</sup> We find it six times in the first Psalm where they are compared to chaff that the wind blows away. Here it is the wind whipping the quiet waters into a churning sea. James uses the image for a person who does not trust God enough to believe that He will answer prayers. We read: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”<sup>5</sup>

The picture in Isaiah is only partly correct in describing the way of the wicked. The agitated waters of the sea are subject to the wind that blows upon them; the lack of peace of the wicked is not caused by outside factors. The breath of God may agitate a person but it does not cause the lack of peace. That is the fruit of his own wicked heart. This chapter opened by declaring shalom upon “those who walk uprightly” (v.2) and it closes by withholding it from the double-minded.

c. The Sabbath people (58:1–14)

**1 "Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins.**

**2 For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.**

**3 ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ “Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.**

**4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.**

**5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?**

**6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?**

**7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?**

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1. Lev. 19:18; Matt. 19:19

2. Matt. 5:4,6

3. Heb. 13:15

4. Gen. 18:23

5. James 1:5-8

**8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.**

**9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk,**

**10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.**

**11 The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.**

**12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.**

**13 "If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD's holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,**

**14 then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob." The mouth of the LORD has spoken.**

In his introduction to this chapter, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "Isaiah now embarks on a second contrast. In chapters 56 – 57 he contrasted the inclusive unity of the Lord's Sabbath people (56:1–8) with the inadequacies and divisions of the actual community (56:9 – 57:21). Here he contrasts the true Sabbath life (58:1–14) with their actual, disconsolate awareness of themselves (59:1–13). As he shows, true Sabbath-keeping demands consecrating one's timetable to God (*cf.* Ex. 16:22–30; Nu. 15:32–36), but ... the Sabbath is also a test whether the heart delights in God. Within the Isaianic literature, chapter 58 belongs with 1:10–20, in condemnation both of the 'unholy alliance' between religious punctiliousness and personal and social indiscipline, and of a religion that assumes a relationship with God while discounting a relationship with other people. In structure, rebuke (1) is matched by promise (14); the fast without blessing (2–5) is balanced by the feast with blessing (13–14a); and the central verses (6–12) expound the Lord's chosen fast and the enrichments it brings."

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments here, particularly about the mention of fasting: "The whole Law seems to be in force, and the People to make a show of keeping it, and to complain that they are not properly rewarded for their religiousness. God tears the mask from their face, and shows the difference between true religion and the pretence of it." The Apostle Paul speaks of people who are "having a form of godliness but denying its power."<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the condemnatory character of this chapter, the way in which Isaiah is told to proclaim the message has a victorious note in it. The instrument referred to was not a metal trumpet. The Hebrew text uses the word *showphar* or *shophar* in "Raise your voice like a trumpet." The *shophar* was a ram's horn which was blown at festive occasions such as New Moon or the Year of Jubilee. We read in the Psalms: "Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon, and when the moon is full, on the day of our Feast."<sup>2</sup> And in the ordinance of the Year of Jubilee, God said: "Count off seven sabbaths of years — seven times seven years — so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years. Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property."

1. II Tim. 3:5

2. Ps. 81:3

The use of the ram's horn in itself contains a mixture of sweet and bitter. The very fact that a horn was used as a musical instrument meant that the animal to which it had belonged had been killed, probably as a sacrifice. The way in which the Word of God comes to us is particularly through the death of His Son. Even the Word that brings conviction of sin is based on the cross.

The two Hebrew words rendered "rebellion" and "sins" are *pesha`* and *chatta'ah*. *Pesha`* stands for a crime, as in the verse: "Jacob was angry and took Laban to task. 'What is my *crime*?' he asked Laban. 'What sin have I committed that you hunt me down?' " <sup>1</sup> *Chatta'ah* refers sometimes to habitual sinfulness as in the verse: "Then the LORD said, 'The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their *sin* so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.'" <sup>2</sup>

The people of Isaiah's day made a good show of piety and humility, but they had not surrendered themselves to God. The human heart is so deceptive that it can use piety as a cloak to cover a life of sinful habits. They covered their life of rebellion against God by waving a white flag of surrender, without committing the act of capitulation. The Holy Spirit wants to rule our lives and for that we have to give Him the keys, all of them. In the words of James: "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."<sup>3</sup>

In the first chapter of Isaiah we read that the Lord said: " 'The multitude of your sacrifices — what are they to me?' says the LORD. 'I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations — I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood.' " <sup>4</sup> Here the prophet has come full circle.

Isaiah is ordered to shout out his message as if he were blowing a shophar. *Barnes' Notes* states about the meaning of this: "Speak loud and distinct, so that the language of reproof may be heard. The sense is, the people are insensible and stupid. They need something to rouse them to a sense of their guilt. Go and proclaim it so that all may hear. Speak not in whispers; speak not to a part, but speak so earnestly that their attention will be arrested, and so that all shall hear." This does not mean that conviction of sin only comes when people are shouted at. A wakeup call can also come in whispers. But sin lulls the soul to sleep and it takes the powerful ministry of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man to bring about conviction.

The sin of self-deception is the most dangerous imaginable. The devil will make sure that those who believe themselves to be pious will not wake up to the reality of their condition until it is too late. Jesus reserved His strongest condemnation for those who considered themselves to be examples of religiosity. He called them "hypocrites, snakes, brood of vipers."<sup>5</sup> The greatest danger is in not knowing oneself. We do well, therefore, to pray David's prayer: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."<sup>6</sup>

Like giving alms and prayer, fasting ought to be a private matter worked out in our intimacy with God. Fasting is meant to give urgency to prayer and to bring us to a place of humility and surrender. If fasting is done for the purpose of projecting an image of spirituality to the outside world, it not only defeats the purpose, but it damages the intimacy of fellowship with God instead of enhancing it. Jesus said to the people of His time: "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to

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1. Gen. 31:36
  2. Gen. 18:20,21
  3. James 2:17
  4. Isa. 1:11-15
  5. See Matt. Chapter 23.
  6. Ps. 139:23,24

show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”<sup>1</sup>

The people Isaiah was told to address here believed that God owed them something for their fast. They inquired into the will of God as if they intended to obey it, without having the slightest intention to do so.

This is illustrated in what happened after the fall of Jerusalem, when Jeremiah was left in the ruined city with some people who had escaped deportation to Babylon. Those people put up a show of piety and willingness to obey without really wanting to know the will of God. We read: “Then all the army officers, including Johanan son of Kareah and Jezaniah son of Hoshaiah, and all the people from the least to the greatest approached Jeremiah the prophet and said to him, ‘Please hear our petition and pray to the LORD your God for this entire remnant. For as you now see, though we were once many, now only a few are left. Pray that the LORD your God will tell us where we should go and what we should do.’ ‘I have heard you,’ replied Jeremiah the prophet. ‘I will certainly pray to the LORD your God as you have requested; I will tell you everything the LORD says and will keep nothing back from you.’ Then they said to Jeremiah, ‘May the LORD be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act in accordance with everything the LORD your God sends you to tell us. Whether it is favorable or unfavorable, we will obey the LORD our God, to whom we are sending you, so that it will go well with us, for we will obey the LORD our God.’ ” Ten days later Jeremiah told them that the LORD had warned them not to go to Egypt. We read: “When Jeremiah finished telling the people all the words of the LORD their God — everything the LORD had sent him to tell them — Azariah son of Hoshaiah and Johanan son of Kareah and all the arrogant men said to Jeremiah, ‘You are lying! The LORD our God has not sent you to say, ‘ ‘You must not go to Egypt to settle there.’ ’ But Baruch son of Neriah is inciting you against us to hand us over to the Babylonians, so they may kill us or carry us into exile to Babylon.’ So Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers and all the people disobeyed the LORD’s command to stay in the land of Judah. Instead, Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers led away all the remnant of Judah who had come back to live in the land of Judah from all the nations where they had been scattered. They also led away all the men, women and children and the king’s daughters whom Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard had left with Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, and Jeremiah the prophet and Baruch son of Neriah. So they entered Egypt in disobedience to the LORD and went as far as Tahpanhes.”<sup>2</sup>

Vv.3b-12 make us understand that fasting is more than abstaining from food; it is a lifestyle. Going without food or without certain kinds of food may be part of fasting but it is not the essence of it. We saw earlier that fasting was not meant to be a public display, but there is a sense in which the effect of our fasting influences our public life. We cannot love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind without loving our neighbor as ourselves. As the Apostle John puts it: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”<sup>3</sup> God comes to us in the disguise of a neighbor and He considers that we treat Him as we treat our neighbor. Jesus will say to each of us on the Day of Judgment: “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me,” or “I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”<sup>4</sup>

The people Isaiah addressed fasted but, at the same time, exploited their workers and got in fistfights with others (vv.3b, 4). They kept people in slavery and let others starve while they ate their fill

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1. Matt. 6:16-18
  2. Jer. 42:1-6; 43:1-7
  3. I John 4:20,21
  4. Matt. 25:40, 45

(vv.6, 7). They neglected to take care of their own relatives (v.7), let alone care about strangers. God answers the prayers of those who show their love for Him in their love to their fellowmen.

The picture Isaiah paints is of a ruined city and a deported population. The fact that historically this had not happened yet did not prevent his prophetic eye from seeing it happen. The double purpose of his prophecy was, first of all, to prevent it from ever happening and, secondly, once it had happened to bring healing and restoration to the people and the land.

God's promises proclaimed in this chapter richly offset the misery of sin and disobedience. God offers them light in their darkness and complete protection (vv.8, 10). He will answer prayer by revealing His presence (v.9). They would become like an oasis in the desert, a place of refreshment for others (v.11). The city of Jerusalem that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed would be rebuilt and the place of God's revelation of Himself on earth would be rehabilitated (v.12).

The last two verses of this chapter turn the searchlight again on the way the Sabbath is observed. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: "In the structure of this poem, verses 13–14a are the feast with a blessing, matching the fast without a blessing in 2–5, and verse 14b–d is a promise, matching the rebuke of 1; but the verses also form a third *If ... then* series, *i.e.* keep a true *Sabbath* and blessing will follow. The Lord is more concerned with the enjoyment of his blessing through obedience to his commands than in self-imposed deprivations. In 13a–d, Isaiah emphasizes positive recognition of the dignity of the Sabbath as *holy* and *honorable*, and in 13ef the protection of the Sabbath from improper activities. *Keep you feet from breaking*: (lit.) 'turn back your foot from,' equivalent to 'watch your step,' take a thoughtful approach to how you use the day. It is not a 'free-for-all,' a day of *doing as you please*, yet it is an 'exquisite delight' as the lexicons translate *delight* (*oneg*). Isaiah deals in principles, not directives; what is done on the Lord's day must recognize that it is a holy and special day; it must be conducive to finding true delight; it is not a matter of personal preference (*going your own way*) or indulgence (*doing as you please*)."

The Hebrew text of v.13 contrasts the Lord's way, the Lord's pleasure and the Lord's Word with the way of man, the pleasure of man and the word of man. *The New Living Translation* renders vv.13, 14: "Keep the Sabbath day holy. Don't pursue your own interests on that day, but enjoy the Sabbath and speak of it with delight as the LORD's holy day. Honor the LORD in everything you do, and don't follow your own desires or talk idly. If you do this, the LORD will be your delight. I will give you great honor and give you your full share of the inheritance I promised to Jacob, your ancestor. I, the LORD, have spoken!" Keeping the Sabbath does not consist merely in not doing certain things but rather in doing them. It means making the Lord's delight, the Lord way, and the Lord's Word our priority. It means recognizing Jesus Christ as Lord of the Sabbath.<sup>1</sup> In the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, it means entering into God's rest.<sup>2</sup>

#### d. The guilty people (59:1–13)

Introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "Following in sequence from 58:1–14, the charges continue (59:1–8), but now they are met by an admission of guilt and helplessness (59:9–13). With this broad division the passage consists of accusations (1–4b, couched in second-person plural verbs), descriptions (the third-person plural verbs of 5–7) and confessions (the first-person plural of 9–12). Verses 4cd, 8 and 13 are concluding summaries."

##### i. Accusations (59:1–4)

***I Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.***

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1. Matt. 12:8  
2. Heb. 4:1-11

**2 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.**

**3 For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things.**

**4 No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.**

In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Harold Kushner makes the statement that God's problem is not that He doesn't want to help or that He would not be a loving God, but that He does not have the power to intervene in human affairs and heal sickness. This would mean that God would not be omnipotent. If this were true it means that God is not perfect; and if He is not perfect in one of His attributes, He would not be perfect God. And if God is not the One who is "sustaining all things by his powerful word"<sup>1</sup> then He is not only not God at all, but all the atoms and molecules of the universe would disintegrate instantaneously.

We can almost hear the complaint of the people in Isaiah's day, saying that God means well, but He does not have what it takes to come and deliver them. They see God as an old man whose hearing has gone down and whose arm aches with pain, preventing Him from acting.

To this Isaiah stands up and proclaims that the problem is not with God but with the people. God has taken care of the sin problem of mankind, as we saw in earlier chapters, but unless man recognizes the existence of sin in his life as a problem and accepts God's provision of grace, mankind will be left in its sinful condition and human prayers will not be answered.

It is quite likely that Isaiah uttered this prophecy during the reign of King Manasseh, during whose period in office Jerusalem was filled with the blood of innocent citizens. *Fausset's Bible Dictionary* states about Manasseh: "Tradition represents Manasseh as having sawed Isaiah in sunder for his faithful protest (Heb 11:37). Josephus (Ant. 10:3, sec. 1) says Manasseh slew all the righteous and the prophets day by day, so that Jerusalem flowed with blood, Isaiah (Isa 57:1-4, etc.) alludes also to the 'mockings' of which the godly 'had trial' (Heb 11:36). The innocent blood thus shed was what the Lord would not pardon the nation, though He accepted Manasseh on repentance and honored the godly Josiah (2 Kings 23:26; 24:4; Jer 15:4)."

The word rendered "iniquity" is *avon*, which has the meaning of "perversity." God used it in describing the sins of the Canaanites, when He said to Abraham: "In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for *the sin* of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."<sup>2</sup>

What Isaiah is saying is that the power to save is still there and it is available through the channels of prayer. God has not become weak or inaccessible. The problem is on our side, not on His. The dilemma is "your sins have hidden his face from you." True fellowship with God will ultimately be a face-to-face relationship. The original high-priestly blessing that Aaron had to pronounce over the people reads: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace."<sup>3</sup> Moses knew in principle the intimacy of this fellowship with God, because we read: "The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend."<sup>4</sup> But when Moses asked God: "Now show me your glory," God answered: "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But ... you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."<sup>5</sup>

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1. Heb. 1:3
  2. Gen. 15:16
  3. Num. 6:24-26
  4. Ex. 33:11
  5. Ex. 33:18-20

Yet it had always been God's intention that we would see His face and be transformed in the process. At present the sight of God's face would kill us. As the Apostle John says in the prologue of his Gospel: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known."<sup>1</sup> And in *Revelation* we read: "His servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."<sup>2</sup>

This present separation from God is so immeasurably deep that most people are not or hardly aware of it. We all know deep in our heart that something is wrong with the world and sometimes we realize that the wrong is within us, but how deep the chasm is that separates us from God remains hidden from most of us. We are often not desperate enough to look this reality in the face. We have not all committed murder, so we do not believe that the words "your hands are stained with blood" pertain to us, and consequently we do not believe that our fingers are stained with guilt either. But, as the Apostle John writes: "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him."<sup>3</sup> And in God's sight all members of the human race will be held accountable for all the murders that were ever committed on earth. We conclude this from Jesus' words to His contemporaries: "And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar."<sup>4</sup> Zechariah had been killed centuries before the people Jesus spoke to were born and the murder of Abel took place millennia before that, yet they were held responsible and so will we.

The corruption of the human heart does not exclude the use of paths of righteousness. The fact that a legal system is used does not mean that justice is pursued. The devil is very clever to borrow parts of God's system of justice and to use the accompanying language, but his intent is to reach a goal of injustice. We read, for instance, that Zechariah had a vision in which he saw "Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him."<sup>5</sup> The accusation was the fact that Joshua was clothed in filthy clothing, meaning that he was stained with sin. Satan did not mention who the author of this sin was, but he tried to use God's system of justice against Himself, inferring that God's holiness would not permit Him to leave His high priest unpunished. In the same vein Stalin and Hitler used the court system to promote their own unrighteousness. In the case of Israel J. Alec Motyer observes in *Isaiah*: "the reference is not to corruption on the bench but the misuse of the legal process for illegal ends."

ii. Descriptions (59:5–8)

***5 They hatch the eggs of vipers and spin a spider's web. Whoever eats their eggs will die, and when one is broken, an adder is hatched.***

***6 Their cobwebs are useless for clothing; they cannot cover themselves with what they make. Their deeds are evil deeds, and acts of violence are in their hands.***

***7 Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways.***

***8 The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks in them will know peace.***

"Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things" covers both lying and gossiping. The images in v.5 indicate that those who are not born of God have the devil as their father. To

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1. John 1:18  
 2. Rev. 22:3,4  
 3. I John 3:15  
 4. Matt. 23:35  
 5. Zech. 3:1

hatch eggs of vipers indicates that there consists a family relationship with the original serpent. We need a new birth to cut these family ties and receive a heart that is sensitive to God's love and grace.

Ever since the fall, man's problem has been to find the right covering for sin. Adam and Eve tried fig leaves, but they discovered that that did not protect their sinful souls in the presence of God. It was only after God had covered them by means of the death of a fellow creature, that they could stand before their Creator. The people in Isaiah's day thought they had progressed by covering themselves with cobwebs, believing that that could thus conceal the nakedness of their soul. Every human being must discover for himself that the only acceptable covering is the one God provides for us in Jesus Christ. It is not our opinion about ourselves that will stand in the Day of Judgment, but God's verdict. As Jesus states in His letter to the church in Laodicea: "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see."<sup>1</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states about the section of vv.5-8: "This is an objective third-person statement of the situation, made both figuratively (5-6b) and in reality (6c-7), with a summary (8)." Motyer further observes: "There is something about sinful humans which is a constant potential menace to others and makes all efforts ultimately ineffective for any good purpose."

Isaiah paints the picture of the hands, the feet and the head that are all involved in producing iniquity. Sin is both the product of the mind and the consequence of the way of life we choose. Jesus indicates that the road we travel is the outcome of the initial choice we make. In the words: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."<sup>2</sup> The gate represents the choice, and the broad and narrow road are the results of that choice. It is not the road we travel on that conditions us to sin or be holy, to be lost or be saved; the kind of road we travel on is the outcome of the kind of gate we enter. The inclusive warning in these verses is that the peace we experience is the result of the right choice. Only those who accept God's peace offer will have peace with God and with themselves. Sin will make us restless. When we sin we actually sin, first of all, against ourselves. Motyer observes here: "This is peace in its most comprehensive sense: peace with God, peace in society, peace in a mature personality no longer at war with itself."

iii. Confessions (59:9-13)

***9 So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.***

***10 Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes. At midday we stumble as if it were twilight; among the strong, we are like the dead.***

***11 We all growl like bears; we moan mournfully like doves. We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away.***

***12 For our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us. Our offenses are ever with us, and we acknowledge our iniquities:***

***13 rebellion and treachery against the LORD, turning our backs on our God, fomenting oppression and revolt, uttering lies our hearts have conceived.***

In these verses the prophet finds himself in the presence of God. We conclude this from the words "in your sight" (v.12). It is the realization of God's presence that makes us wake up to the reality of our condition. Sin blinds us to the point that we do not even realize that we are blind. After Jesus healed the man

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1. Rev. 3:17,18

2. Matt. 7:13,14

who was born blind, we read: “Jesus said, ‘For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.’ Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, ‘What? Are we blind too?’ Jesus said, ‘If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.’”<sup>1</sup> The darkness which Isaiah describes is the darkness of the spiritually blind. The kingdom of God is called a kingdom of light. As the Apostle Peter describes it: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”<sup>2</sup> And the Apostle Paul adds: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.”<sup>3</sup>

In v.11 – “We all growl like bears; we moan mournfully like doves,” we may have some trouble understanding the images. The Hebrew word rendered “growl” is *hamah*, which covers a whole gamut of noises. It can mean “to hum, moan, or clamor.” For example we find it in the verse: “Adonijah and all the guests who were with him heard it as they were finishing their feast. On hearing the sound of the trumpet, Joab asked, ‘What’s the meaning of all *the noise* in the city?’”<sup>4</sup> But also in: “Why are you *downcast*, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?”<sup>5</sup> And in: “My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening; my heart *began to pound* for him.”<sup>6</sup> Also in: “My heart *laments* for Moab like a harp.”<sup>7</sup> In spite of the outward appearance, the growling of the bear and the mournful moaning of the dove are literary parallels. The purpose of the parallel is not to distinguish between the noises made but between the character of the creatures that make them.

Isaiah’s prayer here is as of those “who mourn” and who consequently “will be comforted,” and of “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” who “will be filled.”<sup>8</sup>

The reason for this mourning is that the nation does not practice justice and consequently God’s righteousness does not reach them. Israel was built on the principle of righteousness that God had imputed to Abraham when he believed God.<sup>9</sup> But instead of bearing the fruit of righteousness in practicing justice they became unrighteous and God withheld His grace from them. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: “Isaiah, master of drama, has used blindness (10), bears and doves (11) illustratively. Finally, he presents a court scene, with sin as the prosecutor and the Lord (*in your sight*, lit. ‘before you’), as judge. We may labor under sin’s disabilities (10), lament its hurts and frustrations (11), but these pale into insignificance before the reality of divine judgment and the sentence of the law.”

The Hebrew text of v.13 reads literally: “In transgressing and lying against the LORD ...” The Hebrew word, rendered “rebellion” in *The New International Version* is *pasha`* which has the meaning of “to break away from just authority.” The first time it is used in the Old Testament is in Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple. “And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the *offenses* they have committed against you, and cause their conquerors to show them mercy.”<sup>10</sup> “Treachery” is a good rendering of the Hebrew word *kachash*, because it has the meaning of lying with the added sense of feigning. The first time this word is used is when God announced that Sarah would give birth to a son and Sarah secretly laughs. We read: “Sarah was afraid, so she *lied* and said, ‘I did not laugh.’”<sup>11</sup> More clearly it

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1. John 9:39-41
  2. I Peter 2:9
  3. Eph. 5:8
  4. I Kings 1:41
  5. Ps. 42:5
  6. Song 5:4
  7. Isa. 16:11
  8. See Matt. 5:4,6.
  9. Gen. 15:6
  10. I Kings 8:50

is used in the context of the sin of Achan who stole some of the banned items of Jericho. We read: "Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have *lied*, they have put them with their own possessions."<sup>1</sup>

#### XI. THE PROMISED CONQUEROR: VENGEANCE AND SALVATION (59:21 – 60:22)

a. Preface: situation and remedy (59:14–20)

***14 So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter.***

***15 Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice.***

***16 He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.***

***17 He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.***

***18 According to what they have done, so will he repay wrath to his enemies and retribution to his foes; he will repay the islands their due.***

***19 From the west, men will fear the name of the LORD, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory. For he will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the LORD drives along.***

***20 "The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins," declares the LORD***

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: "The recapitulatory *So* looks back over all the ground covered since 56:1 and introduces a summary statement (14–15ab). This is followed by the Lord's reaction (15c, 16ab) and proposed action (16c–18), and the preface ends with a new world centered on Zion (19–20)."

The picture Isaiah paints in vv.14-15 of this chapter is an exposition of his personal experience when he saw the Lord "seated on a throne, high and exalted," and he cried: "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."<sup>2</sup> Isaiah's reaction was the inevitable result of the realization that man is created in the image and likeness of God. And when the copy is placed next to the Original and it becomes apparent that the true copy has turned into a caricature, conviction of sin becomes overwhelming. That experience had become the basis of Isaiah's call to prophecy. Here it comes back in his application of the vision to the reality. When a person sees God, he understands what he is supposed to be but is not. God's glory has this conviction result upon each of us. On the Day of Judgment every human being will testify against himself. God will not need Satan to do the job for Him. There will be no appeal to a Fifth Amendment to avoid self-incrimination. Self-incrimination will be our only chance of salvation! Poetry may take over in the description of justice that has been driven back and righteousness standing at a distance and truth stumbling in the street and honesty finding itself unable to open the door, but the implication is that this is all the result of our own doing.

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* covers the whole section of vv.15b-21, observing: "In verses 15b-21 is predicted God's personal interposition to rescue helpless sinners from their guilt and bondage. The standpoint here is Calvary. Displeased as Jehovah was with the Jews' complete moral failure, he was also distressed at the absence of any qualified human mediator for Israel. The only course left was for him to become the Mediator himself - His arm brought salvation unto him - in the person of Jesus Christ, who alone

11. Gen. 18:15

1. Josh. 7:11

2. Isa. 6:1,5

was clad with spotless righteousness impenetrable to Satan's darts. But the First Advent is here combined with the Second, at which Messiah will come to crush the world power (at Armageddon) and enforce God's holy standards upon all the inhabitants of earth. The whole world will come to revere Jehovah, and his Holy Spirit will successfully repel all attacks upon his redeemed people ... Redeemer here is go'el, 'kinsman-redeemer,' which involves a blood relationship (into which God could not enter except through the incarnation of Christ). The true people of God will ever be a witnessing people, faithfully proclaiming the truth of the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit."

The word "displeased" is the translation of two Hebrew words that can be rendered "was evil in his eyes." *Barnes' Notes* comments: "The existence of so much sin and darkness was contrary to the benevolent feelings of his heart." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* adds: "The iniquity of Israel, so desperate as to require nothing short of Yahweh's interposition to mend it, typifies the same necessity for a Divine Mediator existing in the deep corruption of man. Israel, the model nation was chosen to illustrate this awful fact."

Isaiah describes God's reaction to human corruption as an act of revenge. Ezekiel would take up Isaiah's words, saying: "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none. So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD."<sup>1</sup>

The wrath of God demands justice. Sin constitutes a stain on God's perfect holiness. If God would allow that smudge to remain He would no longer be perfect, which means that He would no longer be God. The "salvation" in the phrase "so his own arm worked salvation for him" stands, first of all, for the recovery of God's own holiness.

Isaiah describes the process in awesome detail. The Apostle Paul must have borrowed Isaiah's language when describing the armor of God the Christian must put on.<sup>2</sup> Paul calls it "the armor of God" because it is what God wears.

The incomprehensible part in all of this for us is the fact that, although Isaiah presents God's action as a spontaneous reaction to man's corruption, the plan of salvation involving the death of Christ was laid in eternity. "The Lamb ... was slain from the creation of the world."<sup>3</sup> God took vengeance upon sin and its author by taking the punishment for sin upon Himself. What Isaiah describes here as a penalty for humanity is what God does to those who refuse the payment He made for them.

The picture that is painted is that of a military action. V.17 uses the words "righteousness," "salvation," "vengeance," and "zeal." J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: "*Righteousness* (17) is the moral integrity of all the Lord will do, *salvation* is the deliverance of his people, *vengeance* is the just requital of his foes, and *zeal* the determination which will bring the work to completion. Worldwide (18) this work will be done with exact justice (*what they have done ... their due*)."

The fear of the Name of the LORD will be worldwide. This is put in a positive way, not as denoting the fear of punishment sinners have, but as an awe for the glory of the Lord. It is a reaction of worship for the mystery of love that works salvation. *The New International Version* renders v.19b "For he will come like a pent-up flood that the breath of the LORD drives along." *The New King James Version* reads: "When the enemy comes in like a flood, The Spirit of the LORD will lift up a standard against him." J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on this: "NIV (adopting a minutely altered Hebrew text) presents this pictorially as *pent-up flood*, released and driven by a divine wind. The change is not, however, necessary and is uncertain in detail. The words more naturally mean, 'When an adversary comes in like a stream, the Spirit of the Lord lifts a banner against him.' This could well be a proverbial saying used appropriately here: the 'adversary' is

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1. Ezek. 22:30,31

2. See Eph. 6:10-18.

3. Rev. 13:8

all that opposes the Lord and his helpless people, but the Lord's Spirit rallies his own forces (in context, the Lord's 'arm' and 'righteousness,' 16cd) to his banner (11:10) and wins the victory."

b. The Covenant Mediator and his achievement (59:21–60:22)

i. The Covenant Mediator (59:21)

***"As for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD. "My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever," says the LORD.***

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "The sequence of 59:1–20 is suddenly – and mysteriously – interrupted. The three sections of accusation (1–4), description (5–8) and confession (9–13) have been followed by a section on rectification (14–20), in which the Lord himself undertakes to do what his people cannot do – achieve vengeance and salvation on a worldwide scale, with Zion at the center of it all – and the sequence might well have ended with glorification (60:1–22): Zion, the center of world pilgrimage. What then to make of 59:21?" Having asked the question, Motyer proceeds to prove, quoting previous references in *Isaiah*, that the Lord already pledged Himself to Israel in a covenant relationship. Secondly, that "the worldwide, Zion-centered vengeance and salvation were attributed to the Spirit of the Lord." Thirdly, that it is the Servant of the Lord who, by the Spirit of the Lord, brings this worldwide revelation and salvation. Fourthly, that this Servant has a family extending through the generations. "Finally, this introduction of the Covenant Mediator in 59:21, with its 'tailpiece' (60:1–2) affirming the worldwide significance of the city of Zion, is the first of four passages in which he figures as the appointed Executor (53:10) of the Lord's purposes. The second passage is 61:1–4 where the Anointed One brings in the day of favor and vengeance. Its tailpiece (61:5–9) pledges restoration and a priestly people central to the nations. In the third passage, 61:10 – 62:7, he receives the 'garments of salvation' which, in 59:17, the Lord himself donned in order to undertake for his helpless people, and to achieve (cf. 59:18–20) the glory of Zion at the center of the world, a truth confirmed in the tailpiece (62:8–12). And the fourth, 63:1–6, describes how this splendidly robed figure returns, having accomplished vengeance and redemption. Formally, these four passages recall the Servant Songs: the same number, with added tailpieces; and, in each series, the first and fourth are reports, the second and third are testimonies. In each series, too, the first passage (42:1–4; 59:21) concerns status and task, the second (49:1–6; 61:1–3) ministry and objective, the third (50:4–9; 61:10 – 62:7) personal commitment, and the fourth (52:13 – 53:12; 63:1–6) completion of the work. In brief, here is a third messianic figure, completing the portrayals of King (chs. 1 – 37) and Servant (38 – 55). The King reigns, the Servant saves, and the Anointed One consummates salvation and vengeance."

ii. The universal city (60:1–22)

J. Alec Motyer divides this chapter into four sections: a. The Lord in Zion (60:1– 3), b. The world in Zion (60:4–9), c. The city of destiny (60:10–14), and d. Zion transformed (60:15–22).

**a. The Lord in Zion (60:1– 3)**

***1 "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.***

***2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.***

***3 Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.***

In introducing this chapter, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "This poem meditates on the Abrahamic theme (Gn. 12:1–3) that those who bless him will be blessed and those that curse him will be

cursed ... No geographical Zion could contain the gathering world with its flocks; Isaiah is foreseeing, in terms natural to him, both the present Zion of Hebrews 12:2 and the coming Zion of Revelation 21:9–25.”

*The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* comments: “It is still night. The inward and outward condition of the church is night; and if it is night followed by a morning, it is so only for those who ‘against hope believe in hope.’ The reality which strikes the senses is the night of sin, of punishment, of suffering, and of mourning—a long night of nearly seventy years. In this night, the prophet, according to the command of God, has been prophesying of the coming light. In his inward penetration of the substance of his own preaching, he has come close to the time when faith is to be turned to sight. And now in the strength of God, who has made him the mouthpiece of His own creative fiat, he exclaims to the church, v. 1: ‘Arise, grow light; for thy light cometh, and the glory of Jehovah riseth upon thee.’ ”

“Arise, shine” is the translation of a Hebrew alliteration that is nigh to impossible to render with the same poetic force: *Quwmiy, `Owriy*. The picture shows us Zion still in the dark of night, called on to rise and shine. This suggests faith in the coming light to the point where the light, that is still invisible, has such an effect that it sets aglow beforehand. No better illustration of faith and its workings can be imagined.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Zion cannot shine with her own light, for she has no light of her own, having preferred to ‘walk in darkness’ (...Isaiah 59:9). But she may reflect the radiance which streams from the Person of Jehovah, whose glory is risen upon her. ‘In thy light shall we see light’ (...Psalm 36:9).”

Put in the historical perspective of Isaiah’s day, this prophecy was uttered centuries before the beginning of the Babylonian captivity. The primary purpose was, undoubtedly, to lay a foundation of comfort for those who would find themselves in the darkness of that period. But Isaiah’s vision reaches well beyond that. The physical Zion, the home of David, the place where the temple stood, where God revealed Himself on earth, never emitted this kind of light that would dispel the darkness of this world. What Isaiah depicts for us here is the New Jerusalem, coming down from heaven to earth and shining with the glory of God.<sup>1</sup>

There have been various efforts to render “Arise and shine.” According to *Barnes’ Notes*, some Bible scholars believe it should be “Be thou enlightened.” Others suggest, “Be enlightened, for thy light cometh.” One suggestion is simply “Be light.” *The Septuagint* reads: “Be enlightened; be enlightened, O Jerusalem.” The commentary adds: “The idea probably is this, ‘rise now from a state of obscurity and darkness. Enter into light; enter into times of prosperity.’ It is not so much a command to impart light to others as it is to be encompassed with light and glory. It is the language of prophecy rather than of command; a call rather to participate in the light that was shining than to impart it to others. The Septuagint and the Chaldee here add the name ‘Jerusalem,’ and regard it as addressed directly to her.”

In a way this prophecy finds its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ and in those who have put their faith in Him. Jesus said of Himself: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”<sup>2</sup> And to us He says: “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”<sup>3</sup> The only way in which we can emit this light is in fellowship with Him.

In this appeal to His people, God refers to the time Israel was brought out of Egypt and was born as a nation. On their journey to Canaan, God told them: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>4</sup> Israel had never lived up to her calling of being “a

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1. See Rev. 21:10,11.

2. John 8:12

3. Matt. 5:14-16

kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Neither would she become what God had wanted her to be after the Babylonian captivity. And the church, to which this call has been extended, has not fared much better in the history of this world. But we understand that God’s plan will not fail and, after this world has lived through its last night, the dawn of the new morning will bring about in all its fullness what Isaiah foretells here.

**b. The world in Zion (60:4–9)**

**4** *"Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm.*

**5** *Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.*

**6** *Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.*

**7** *All Kedar’s flocks will be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth will serve you; they will be accepted as offerings on my altar, and I will adorn my glorious temple.*

**8** *"Who are these that fly along like clouds, like doves to their nests?*

**9** *Surely the islands look to me; in the lead are the ships of Tarshish, bringing your sons from afar, with their silver and gold, to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.*

Although, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, believes that Isaiah’s prophecy does not speak here of a return from Babylonian captivity, it is difficult not to see this as part of the picture. Motyer states: “To confine or even to link this vision to the return from Babylon is to fail to listen to what Isaiah is saying. He envisages a whole world on the move, involving even sea travel (9).” Although it is true that the Jews’ homecoming never took the form of the spectacular image Isaiah paints here, to take that historical event completely out of the picture does not seem warranted either. The glory of God often comes to us in a well-disguised form. When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, only a few saw His glory. The world He made did not recognize Him and His own people did not receive Him.<sup>1</sup>

The result of world evangelism, the preaching of the Gospel to all nations, will ultimately result in the far-away sons and wayward daughters coming back to the place of God’s revelation. Isaiah speaks of this in terms of topography and prosperous trade. The wealth of the sea, the camels carrying loads of gold, the flocks of rams to be sacrificed on God’s altar in Jerusalem, are all pictures of a spiritual prosperity that makes all material affluence look pallid. Isaiah’s poetry uses word pictures that are confined to a place on earth and a flourishing economy, but the content is spiritual. After all, God’s revelation of glory is no longer confined to a building of stone but it is presently found in the Person of Jesus Christ. The Father seeks worshippers who worship Him in spirit and in truth.<sup>2</sup>

According to J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, the places mentioned in vv.6 and 7 represent directions of the compass: “*Midian* ... was in the south; *Ephah* was to the east of the Persian gulf; *Kedar* (7) and *Nebaioth* to the northeast, in the northern Arabian desert. The names are impressionistic of a world converging on Zion.”

In vv.8 and 9 Isaiah looks to the west and picturesquely describes the homecoming of people to the God of Israel. The clouds and doves depict the arrival of ships sailing from the west toward Israel’s harbors. The doves add a peculiar feature of homing to the picture. It expresses the motives of people coming to the Lord, sensing that they belong to Him. When a person comes to the point of receiving God’s lordship over his life, there is a realization that this is what he was made for.

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4. Ex. 19:4-6

1. See John 1:14,10,11.

2. See John 4:23,24.

What happens here on a universal scale had been exemplified by the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon.<sup>1</sup>

**c. The city of destiny (60:10–14)**

**10 "Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you. Though in anger I struck you, in favor I will show you compassion.**

**11 Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations — their kings led in triumphal procession.**

**12 For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will perish; it will be utterly ruined.**

**13 "The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the pine, the fir and the cypress together, to adorn the place of my sanctuary; and I will glorify the place of my feet.**

**14 The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the LORD, Zion of the Holy One of Israel.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states here: “Here is the heart of this great Zion poem. Verses 10 and 14 share the theme of international enterprise to build Zion; 11 and 13 bring us inside the restored city: its ever-open gates speak of unworried security (11; Zc. 2:4–5); the Lord’s sanctuary speaks of his holy presence (13). The central verse 12 makes Zion determinative of destiny: to hold aloof from Zion is to come to destruction.” The imbedded reference to Zechariah 2:4-5 reads: “[another angel came to meet him] and said to him: ‘Run, tell that young man, ‘Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of men and livestock in it. And I myself will be a wall of fire around it,’ ’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will be its glory within.’ ’ ”

We find in these verses a strange mixture of images of Nehemiah’s effort to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the conditions of the New Jerusalem as the Apostle John saw it coming down from heaven. Isaiah’s vision gives a spiritual meaning to Nehemiah’s arduous physical labor, and it adds a physical feature to the spiritual meaning of the walls of the New Jerusalem, which carry the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and are built on the foundation of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.<sup>2</sup>

Although we seldom realize this to its full extent, the way we labor on earth determines in eternity the value of the work we do. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.”<sup>3</sup>

V.12 recalls Israel’s conquest of Canaan, or at least the principle of it. Under the reign of David and Solomon Israel’s hegemony was firmly established in the Middle East. But it was not merely that Israel would militarily subdue its surrounding nations; Israel’s kingdom was supposed to be a kingdom of priests, meaning that they would be the bridge between God and the rest of the world. She was meant to be God’s ambassadors of reconciliation. Individuals and nations who refused God’s reconciliation would do so at their own peril.

Vv.13 and 14 bring to mind the building of the temple in Jerusalem. When King Solomon built the temple, Hiram, king of Tyre, supplied him with the wood.<sup>4</sup> Those who persecuted the children of God will

1. I Kings 10:1-13

2. See Rev. 21:12-14.

3. I Cor. 3:10-15

4. See I Kings 5:1-11.

come and prostrate themselves before God's revelation. This will ultimately happen when "at the name of Jesus every knee [will] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."<sup>1</sup>

**d. Zion transformed (60:15–22)**

*15 "Although you have been forsaken and hated, with no one traveling through, I will make you the everlasting pride and the joy of all generations.*

*16 You will drink the milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts. Then you will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.*

*17 Instead of bronze I will bring you gold, and silver in place of iron. Instead of wood I will bring you bronze, and iron in place of stones. I will make peace your governor and righteousness your ruler.*

*18 No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise.*

*19 The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.*

*20 Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end.*

*21 Then will all your people be righteous and they will possess the land forever. They are the shoot I have planted, the work of my hands, for the display of my splendor.*

*22 The least of you will become a thousand, the smallest a mighty nation. I am the LORD; in its time I will do this swiftly."*

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states here: "In verses 15–16 three items of rejection (*forsaken, hated, no-one*) are matched by three items of transformation (*pride, milk, Savior*) – a transformation of repute and fortune only to be explained as the Lord's doing (16cd). In 17–18, Zion is transformed materially (17a–d), socially (17ef) and spiritually (18). Never-failing spiritual illumination will replace creational radiance (19, 20a–c) and with it all sorrow will vanish (20d). Zion's people will be right with God (21a), eternally secure (21b), made what they are by the Lord in order to 'embody' the Lord's beauty (21c–e) and personally transformed in power (22ab). This vision is not too good to be true but, as guaranteed by the Lord (22cd), too good not to be true."

In a kaleidoscopic fashion, Isaiah makes the poetic images tumble over one another to describe the future condition of Israel. *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "The mixed metaphor is awkward, but readily intelligible. Zion is at once a city and a wife. As a wife, she is 'hated and forsaken,' as a city, no man goes through her." Yet, the mixed metaphor of a city and a bride is exactly what the Bible teaches about those who are in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles. The Apostle John reports in *Revelation*: "One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God."<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah's pictures jump from earth to heaven and back in order to describe both the temporal and eternal condition of God's work of salvation for Israel and all of creation. During and after the Babylonian captivity, Israel had become what Samaria would later be in the days Jesus walked the earth. The Jews would rather cross the Jordan twice to travel from Judea to Galilee, than take the shorter route through Samaria. The reason being that, according to John's Gospel, "Jews do not associate with Samaritans."<sup>3</sup> Here the roles were turned around and the rest of the world avoided Israel.

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1. Phil. 2:10-11

2. Rev. 21:9,10

3. See John 4:9.

Isaiah reverses these roles twice in the beautiful picture of Israel being breastfed by the rest of the world. The history of baby Moses who had been thrown in the Nile to be adopted by Pharaoh's daughter repeats itself here. Israel becomes again what God meant her to be in His plan of salvation of the world.

Israel will come to the point of understanding that it is not her own qualities that propels her to the top, but the grace of God alone. The Hebrew of v.16 reads literally: "You shall know that I the LORD [am] your Savior and your Redeemer." The Hebrew words used for "Savior" and "Redeemer" are *yasha* and *goel*. There is in *yasha* a hidden reference to the Name of Jesus and *goel* points to a blood relative who pays a price for ransom.

V.17 repeats the condition of affluence of the kingdom under Solomon's rule, when "nothing was made of silver, because silver was considered of little value in Solomon's days."<sup>1</sup>

The picture of the New Jerusalem is even clearer drawn in v.18 where the walls are called "Salvation" (*Y<sup>a</sup>shuw`aah*) and the gates "Praise" (*tehillah*).

*Barnes' Notes* comments here: "This is a most beautiful description of the peace and prosperity which would prevail in the times of the Messiah. If the gospel, in its purity, should prevail on earth, there would be no more scenes of violence and war. The battle-shout would be heard no more; the cry of violence, the clangor of arms would resound no more. The pure gospel of the Redeemer has never originated one war; never produced one scene of bloodshed; never once prompted to violence and strife. There has been no war in any age or in any land which the principles of the gospel, if acted on by both the contending nations, would not have prevented; there have been no scenes of bloodshed which would not have been avoided if that had been suffered to control the hearts of people. And no one who believes the Bible to be a revelation from God, can doubt that the time will come when the mad passions of kings and nations shall be subdued, and when wars shall cease to be known except in the melancholy and disgraceful records of past events." Earlier, Isaiah expressed this beautifully as: "He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."<sup>2</sup>

There is no inconsistency in the disappearance of the sun and moon in v.19 and the appearance of both in v.20. The first mention refers to the heavenly bodies we know in the present order of creation, the second to the light and glory of God. The sun and moon we see are pictures of a heavenly reality; they are not the real things. John picks up on Isaiah's picture in his description of the New Jerusalem: "The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp."<sup>3</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: "In the old order of creation, life was governed rigidly by night and day and unpredictably by the fitfulness of sun and moon. But in the new order of salvation, the ruling principle is the changeless presence of the Lord. *Light ... glory* (lit. 'beauty'): the Lord will illuminate and beautify his people; bathe them in his light and change them into his likeness. The former is explained by the promise of his unchanging illumination (20c, beginning with 'for') and the latter illustrated by the banishment for ever of *days of sorrow* (20d), whatever would cast the least blight."

V.21 reveals that the conquest and occupation of Canaan was an image of a heavenly reality. The security of our inheritance is guaranteed by the righteousness of God that has been imputed to us. David elaborated this theme in Psalm 37, where we read: "Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace. The days of the blameless are known to the LORD, and their inheritance will endure forever. Those the LORD blesses will inherit the land, but those he curses will be cut off. For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off; the righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever."<sup>4</sup>

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1. I Kings 10:21
  2. Isa.2:4
  3. Rev. 21:23

Israel's hegemony will no longer be carried out in military actions as it was in the days of Joshua and the early kings. God will fill this earth with His glory through the testimony of those who know Him and serve Him. The Apostle Paul explained this clearly, saying: "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you."<sup>1</sup> The manifestation of God's glory that will cover the earth will be "in His holy people," that is in us.

c. The Anointed One and his transforming work (61:1–9)

i. First testimony of the Anointed One: transformation (61:1–4)

***1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,***

***2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,***

***3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.***

***4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.***

In introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "The Servant Songs meshed into their context, and the same is true of the coming three passages on Isaiah's third messianic figure, the Anointed One ... Here, as in 59:21, he is anointed with the Lord's Spirit for the ministry of the word. In addition to this, (a) as in the second Servant Son (49:1–6), his job description is elaborated and extended. The donation of the divine Spirit to Zion's citizens (59:21) is now a ministry of comfort (1–2) and transformation (3), and moves also in another direction altogether in the executing of *vengeance* – the recipients of which are left undefined. (b) Just as the Servant does what the Lord undertook to do (e.g. 52:10; 53:1), so the tasks of *favor* and *vengeance* were previously the Lord's (59:17). (c) The transformation of Zion's experiences (2c, 3) was also forecast in 60:17ff., and the work of planting (3) links with 60:21. Isaiah is thus taking his messianic portraiture into its next stage: the endowed Zion of 59:21 becomes the transformed Zion of 60:17–22 through the anointed ministry of 61:1–3. This is the passage which Jesus chose to read in Nazareth (Lk.4:16–22), establishing the messianic credentials of Isaiah's presentation. It is to be noted that Jesus ended his reading at the day of the *LORD's favor* (2a). What Isaiah saw as one messianic work, the Lord Jesus divided into two: the salvific purpose of his first coming (Jn.3:17), and the judgmental component of his second coming (Jn. 5:22–29; cf. 2 Thess. 1:7–10). The testimony is in three unequal parts: his preparation (1ab), his task the seven infinitives of 1c–3g, and the results to follow (3h–4)."

The topic of vv.1-3, and actually of this whole section is the preaching of the Word of God. In the context of Isaiah's prophecy, it pertains, first of all, to those who would be languishing in captivity and seemed to have no hope of deliverance. They are the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives and the prisoners. The first question to be asked here is whether Isaiah speaks here about himself as being anointed by the Holy

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4. Ps. 37:3,4,11,18,22,28,29

1. II Thess. 1:6-10

Spirit or whether he speaks prophetically about the Messiah. The answer may very well be “both.” Bible scholars have argued about that extensively. *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “It cannot be denied that the language is such as may be applied in a subordinate sense to the office of the prophet, and that the work of the Redeemer is here described in terms derived from the consolation and deliverance afforded to the long-suffering exiles. But in a much higher sense it refers to the Messiah, and received an entire completion only as applied to him and to his work. Even Grotius, who has been said to ‘find Christ nowhere in the Old Testament,’ remarks, ‘Isaiah here speaks of himself, as the Chaldee observes; but in him we see not an obscure image of Christ.’ ” *The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The words of our Lord in ... Luke 4:21, ‘This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears,’ preclude the application of this passage to any other than the Lord himself. It is simply astonishing that some Christian commentators ... have not seen the force of this argument, but, with the Jews, imagine the prophet to be speaking of his own ministry. It is contrary to the entire spirit of Isaiah’s writings so to glorify himself, and specially unsuitable that, after having brought forward with such emphasis the Person of ‘the Servant’ (...Isaiah 42:1-8; 49:1-12; 1:4-9; 52:13-15; 53:1-12), he should proceed to take his place, and to ‘ascribe to himself those very same official attributes which he has already set forth as characteristic features in his portrait of the predicted One’ ... Hence most recent commentators, whatever their school of thought, have acquiesced in the patristic interpretation, which regarded the Servant of Jehovah as here speaking of himself.”

In all this argumentation, the fact that Jesus draws a dividing line between “the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God,” where Isaiah does not see any does not seem to be taken into account. Also, the idea that Isaiah would “glorify himself,” as the *Pulpit Commentary* suggests, when he speaks of himself as being anointed with the Spirit of the Lord, shows misunderstanding as to what the anointing of the Spirit is all about.

The Hebrew packs the whole meaning of “to preach good news” in the one word *basar*, which literally means: “to be fresh.” Depending on the context it can pertain to bad news as well as good news.

The preaching of the news is the result of the messenger being filled with the Spirit of the Lord. The first recipients of this preaching are the *ʿanav*, “the depressed.” It is the word God used to describe Moses: “Now Moses was a very *humble* man, more *humble* than anyone else on the face of the earth.”<sup>1</sup> The “brokenhearted” are those whose heart is *shabar*, “broken in pieces.” The Word of God brings about their healing. And it is also the Word of God that sets the captives free and releases from darkness for the prisoners. This latter part reads in Luke’s Gospel “recovery of sight for the blind.”<sup>2</sup> This is the rendering *The Septuagint* gives of the Hebrew text. Interestingly, the ones to whom the Word of God is preached here show a striking similarity with those to whom the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount are addressed.

“The year of the LORD’s favor” is, most likely, a reference to the Year of Jubilee, which every person was supposed to celebrate at least once in a lifetime. It was to be celebrated once every fifty years. There is, however, no record in the Old Testament that this law was ever observed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: “We may well ask: Did the Jewish people ever observe the Jubilee Year? There is no reason why they should not have observed it in pre-exilic times ... Perhaps they signally failed in it, and if so, we should not be surprised at all. Not that the institution in itself was cumbered with any obstacles that could not have been overcome; but what is more common than unbelief and unwillingness to trust absolutely in Yahweh? Or, was it observed in post-exilic times? Here, too, we are in the dark. There is, indeed, a tradition according to which the Jubilee Year has never been observed—neither in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah nor at any later period. The truth of this seems to be corroborated by the silence of Josephus, who, while referring quite frequently to the sabbatical year, never once mentions the Year of Jubilee.”

We find the law on the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus: “Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land.

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1. Num. 12:3
  2. Luke 4:18

Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan. The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields. In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to his own property.”<sup>1</sup>

The year of the LORD’s favor is *shaneh ratsown*, the year of God’s delight. It expresses what God had in mind for mankind when He created us. In New Testament terms it may be called “the year of God’s grace.” As the Apostle Paul says: “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.”<sup>2</sup> The Year of Jubilee was a reminder of what life would have been had sin not entered this world.

The year of God’s favor and the day of vengeance are opposites both in content and duration. Where God’s favor will be the hallmark of eternity, His vengeance will mark the Day of Judgment. The Hebrew word *naqam* means: “revenge.” It occurs in Moses’ prophecy about what would happen to Israel when they abandoned the way of the Lord and backslid into the sins of Canaan’s original occupants. God says: “ ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them.’ The LORD will judge his people and have compassion on his servants when he sees their strength is gone and no one is left, slave or free.”<sup>3</sup> The reason Jesus closed the scroll before reading that part of Isaiah prophecy<sup>4</sup> was that “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus saw the gap between the year and the day, a space of more than two millennia, which Isaiah could not see.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, beautifully comments on v.3: “*Provide ... bestow*: in verse 2c the hurt was soothed, but now every possibility of further hurt is removed by a divine replacement therapy. The first verb points to a decision of God and the second to an act of God: he wills our comfort and then gives that which brings and perpetuates comfort. Note the downward movement of the transformation: from the *crown* (lit. ‘head-dress’; 3:30; cf. 61:10; Ex. 39:28), to the head (*oil*), to the clothing (*garment*). (Cf. the *running down* of Ps. 133:2–3, significant of heavenly outpouring.) Note also the inward movement of ashes, the visible evidence of grief (58:5; 2 Sam. 13:19), to *mourning*, grief in the heart, to the inner *spirit of despair*. The Lord thus acts to pierce progressively to the innermost need. *Oil of gladness*: in Psalm 45:7 the ‘oil of joy’ explains the distinctive character of the king. Thus the Anointed One replaces mourning with new life. *Garment*: more properly ‘a wrap,’ over-all cover. Just as (see 59:17) donning garments symbolizes character and commitment, so the gift of an all-covering garment symbolizes the gift of a new nature leading to a new life.”

Although there is in v.4 a hint of return from Babylonian captivity, the language seems to reach well beyond that particular event of history to a much wider application. Jerusalem had been in ruin less than 70 years. Some of the returnees even remembered the temple built by Solomon.<sup>6</sup> The ruins could hardly be called “ancient.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* calls it: “A picture of the glory of the new life that will replace the old,” saying: “The new Israel, charged with the energy of Christ’s Gospel, will rebuild the structure of the theocracy that has been ravaged by the dreadful consequences of disobedience and infidelity. Gentile converts will join in the pastoral work and service of the Kingdom, in willing submission to the Jewish apostles and Jewish Scriptures, and gladly present themselves and all their possessions to the Lord.”

It is the poor and brokenhearted who will be transformed into “oaks of righteousness.” The Hebrew word translated here “oaks” is *ayil*, which has the meaning of “anything strong.” In most cases it is

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1. Lev. 25:9-13
  2. II Cor. 6:2
  3. Deut. 32:35,36
  4. See Luke 4:19,20.
  5. John 3:17
  6. See Hag. 2:1-3; Ezra 3:12.

translated “a ram.” *The New King James Version* calls them “trees of righteousness.” The idea of strength is beautifully conveyed in the first psalm, where those who “delight in the law of the LORD,” are compared to “a tree planted by streams of water.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus uses the same image of strength and support that is contained in the Hebrew here, when He writes to the church in Philadelphia: “Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.”<sup>2</sup>

Both the righteousness and the planting are God’s work. There is an overwhelming beauty in this transformation of brokenness and burnout into the majesty of the oak tree. What God does when His glory touches a human life is beyond imagination.

“They will be called ...” speaks of not what they consider themselves to be but what others perceive them to be. We read about Moses, who reflected the glory of the Lord: “He was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD.”<sup>3</sup> When we live in fellowship with God our strongest influence may be through that which is beyond our control. It is this unconscious testimony that works hardest for the restoration of the kingdom of God. The image of the oak speaks of being, not of action. Rebuilding of ruins, however, is high gear activity. The two are not incompatible. There will be more restoration and healing in the simple manifestation of God’s glory than in anything we actively try to do for God. To be is always more than to do.

ii. Transformation confirmed (61:5–9)

*5 Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.*

*6 And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.*

*7 Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance; and so they will inherit a double portion in their land, and everlasting joy will be theirs.*

*8 "For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them.*

*9 Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed."*

In introducing this section in his *Isaiah*, J. Alec Motyer states: “This is the tailpiece to the Song of the Anointed and, like the tailpiece to the second Servant Song, it falls into two parts: the subservience of the nations (5–6; 49:7) and the Lord’s covenant with his people (7–9; 49:8). The picture of life and prosperity confirms verses 3–4, while at the same time building on the internationalism of 60:10,14. This is a world community (5–6), transformed (7ab), settled (7c–e), joyous (7f), brought into covenant (8), under divine blessing (9).”

The word “foreigners” seems strange in this context. The Hebrew word *zuwr* has the prime meaning of “turning aside for lodging.” In a way, all who belong to the Kingdom of God are foreigners in this world. Abraham considered himself to be a foreigner in Canaan. When Sarah died, we read: “Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said, ‘I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead.’”<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ps. 1:3
  2. Rev. 3:12
  3. Ex. 34:29
  4. Gen. 23:3,4

There is no need to spiritualize this in the sense *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* does, stating: "Gentiles shall first preach to you the salvation of Christ, and feed with divine knowledge the Jewish congregations." As J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "The picture is not of slaves or second-class citizens but of the glad commitment of those coming in from the 'outside' to serve the people of God, to take their place within a serving community of people of God, to take their place within a serving community." The image seems to depict that Israel is being restored to its original calling of being a kingdom of priests in this world.

*The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes: "All that we can safely infer from his prophecy is, that the nationality of Israel will not be swallowed up by the entrance of the heathen into the community of the God of revelation. The people created by Jehovah, to serve as the vehicle of the promise of salvation and the instrument in preparing the way for salvation, will also render Him special service, even after that salvation has been really effected. At the same time, we cannot take the attitude, which is here assigned to the people of sacred history after it has become the teacher of the nations, viz., as the leader of its worship also, and shape it into any clear and definite form that shall be reconcilable with the New Testament spirit of liberty and the abolition of all national party-walls. The Old Testament prophet utters New Testament prophecies in an Old Testament form. Even when he continues to say, 'Ye will eat the riches of the Gentiles, and pride yourselves in their glory,' i.e., be proud of the glorious things which have passed from their possession into yours, this is merely coloring intended to strike the eye, which admits of explanation on the ground that he saw the future in the mirror of the present, as a complete inversion of the relation in which the two had stood before."

This is a complete reversal of the conditions Isaiah had foretold. Foreigners would first come and take Israel away in captivity, crushing it to the ground. Isaiah's vision, however, was not realized upon the return of the people to their homeland. After Israel's rejection of the Messiah, Israel's suffering would even increase up to the more recent pogroms and the holocaust. We are still awaiting the fulfillment of this vision when Israel will recognize her Messiah and heaven will come down upon earth. The words of the Apostle Paul are appropriate here: "Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!"<sup>1</sup>

"Their shame" in v.7 refers to the humiliation of captivity. In their restoration, the Lord will not merely bring them back to the Land of Promise but lead them into a life of abundance. Again, this was not the case when the small group repatriated. The prophecy was not even fulfilled in the restoration of the state of Israel in 1948. To receive a double inheritance of land in Canaan would be an impossibility. The land had been parceled out carefully among the rightful heirs. The Hebrew word *mishneh*, "double," stands for abundance. When God gave the land to the people of Israel, He intended them, not merely to have a place to live, but to enter into His rest. David defined the spiritual qualifications needed for really dwelling in the land, saying: "Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart."<sup>2</sup> And "those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land."<sup>3</sup> And the Apostle Paul clarifies that when God forgives our sins and restores us, He does more than cleaning the slate. We read in Romans: "But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will

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1. Rom. 11:11,12

2. Ps. 37:3,4

3. Ps. 37:9

those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>

When God states in v.8: "For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity," He does not say this to condemn Israel but to justify Himself. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, explains: "In bringing this world Israel into being, with all its transformed status and joys, he acts with the *justice* he loves. In 'favor' as well as in 'vengeance' (2), the Lord is impeccably just. His 'favor' is not favoritism; it is the justice required by the just nature of his saving work. Secondly, he abides by his own standards: *robbery and iniquity* is an emendation from 'I hate robbery in burnt offering,' and expression parallel to (lit.) 'their due in faithfulness' (8c). The burnt offering 'held nothing back' (Gn. 22:16), and anything less was robbing the Lord of his due. The Lord recalls this as he pledges that he will live up to his own standards: in his *faithfulness* he will hold nothing back when he 'gives his people their due.' Thus the 'double' (7) is the Lord's perfect justice (8a), his due and full requital (8c), and turns out to be (8d) his *everlasting covenant* with them, rather 'for them,' to their advantage (cf. 55:3)."

The characteristics for which the Jews are known in the world at present have not always helped to give them the reputation of being blessed by God. In the verse "Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples" the Hebrew word for "descendants," *zera`* "seed" is actually in the singular. "Offspring," for the Hebrew *tse'etsa'* is plural. We may quote here the Apostle Paul's words to the Galatians: "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say 'and to seeds,' meaning many people, but 'and to your seed,' meaning one person, who is Christ."<sup>2</sup> Salvation being from the Jews,<sup>3</sup> the day in world history will come when the Jews will be recognized primarily for the fact that they produced the Savior of the world. That interpretation also provides a logical bridge to the next section.

d. The Savior and his gathered people (61:10–62:12)

i. Second testimony: acceptance of the role of Savior (61:10–62:7)

***10 I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.***

***11 For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.***

***Chapter 62:1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch.***

***2 The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.***

***3 You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.***

***4 No longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate. But you will be called Hephzibah, and your land Beulah; for the LORD will take delight in you, and your land will be married.***

***5 As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.***

***6 I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest,***

***7 and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth.***

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1. Rom. 5:15-17

2. Gal. 3:16

3. See John 4:22.

In introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “The parallel with the four Servant Songs continues. In the third Song (50:4–9) the Servant testified to his acceptance of the Lord’s will and committed himself to obedience and suffering. In the present verses someone accepts with joy (Heb. 12:2) the task of *salvation* (61:10) and commits himself to its completion (62:1). Who is this? The first-person singular continues from 61:1, which in turn looks back to the Anointed One of 59:21. This beautiful poem is in four sections, two alternating pairs. Joy in the work of salvation (61:10) is matched by joy in transformed Zion (62:4–5); note how each section has the same pictures of marriage and the productive earth. The single intercessor (62:1–3) is matched by the interceding company (62:6–7): in the former, kings see the new Zion; in the latter, Zion is the praise of the earth.”

The intense beauty of these verses is produced, among other, by the “romantic touch” given by the image of the bridegroom who reflects on the prospect of a marriage. The Messiah prepares Himself here for His bride. In most other references to this projected union, the limelight is on the bride, rather than on the bridegroom. The bride is Zion, the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, and the bridegroom is the Messiah. The beauty of Jesus is the robe of salvation He wears, which in His ministry as a priest, He imparts to His bride. If sin is ugly to the extreme, salvation is excessively beautiful also. The fact is not mentioned here that the Messiah acquired this robe of righteousness by hanging naked on a cross of shame.

Vv.10 and 11 describe the beauty of righteousness in terms of a priestly marriage. The head of the high priest was adorned with a turban, a sacred diadem and a gold plate with the inscription “Holy to the LORD.”<sup>1</sup> The fact that the Messiah is represented here as a high priest points to the office of intercession, which is the theme of the next several verses.

The picture of a priestly marriage suggests a variety of subjects. The fruit of this marriage is put in terms of a garden in which the flower of righteousness grows. In the next chapter it is the Promised Land that is given in marriage. Isaiah makes the pictures tumble over one another in a rich and delightful way. The essence is an intimate relationship with God which is called “rest.” The Promised Land was in fact much more than a place to live; it was the place of God’s rest, as is written in one of the Psalms: “So I declared on oath in my anger ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ ”<sup>2</sup> That marriage was considered to be a place of rest for a woman is clear from Naomi’s words to her daughters-in-law: “May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.”<sup>3</sup>

Israel’s entering into the rest of God was to be a living model for all nations, a pattern that would entice all of humanity to follow her example. That is the topic of the next chapter and the content of the Messiah’s intercession. Bible scholars have differed in their interpretation of who the speaker is in that chapter. Some believe it is Isaiah, others that it is the Messiah. Although the Messiah is the most likely one, there may be a sense in which Isaiah looks here beyond the Babylonian captivity to Israel’s return to the Promised Land and the place of God’s rest.

The fact that a prayer of intercession is necessary implies that the present Zion is not the model of righteousness and salvation that God intends it to be. The prayer also suggests that God intends to bring this about. The idea that God would not answer His Son’s prayer for Israel and the world would be inconceivable. The author of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* depicts Jesus as the high priest interceding in heaven, saying: “Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”<sup>4</sup>

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “The beauty of Zion’s imputed and imparted righteousness is set forth, and her new status as Christ’s holy bride. God will not be permanently thwarted in his plan to create a holy nation, despite Israel’s sorry record of failure and backsliding.”

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1. Ex. 28:4;39:30
  2. Ps. 95:11
  3. Ruth 1:9
  4. Heb. 7:24,25

“For Zion’s sake” and “for Jerusalem’s sake” stands for more than “because of,” they point to a “raison d’être.” The Hebrew adverb *ma`an* points to purpose. God had created Zion and Jerusalem for the purpose of being a torch of salvation and righteousness in the world. But intercessory prayer was needed in order to make her what she was meant to be. Without the prayers of Jesus none of us can ever be the light of the world God created us to be.

The Hebrew word for “torch” is *lappiyd*. The first time this word is used in the Scriptures is when God made a covenant with Abraham: “When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land.’”<sup>1</sup> Without such a covenant there would be no shining light of righteousness in this world.

The images of dawn and a torch speak of a prevailing condition of darkness. The dawn marks the end of night and torches are not needed in broad daylight. That the darkness is a spiritual darkness is evident from the fact that the blazing torch is representative of righteousness. In New Testament terms, God’s righteousness is the message of the Gospel. As the Apostle Paul states: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah uses the “nations and kings” frequently to indicate the reaction of the whole pagan world to God’s revelation in and through Israel.<sup>3</sup> The words seem to point to masses as well as to individuals, those who have power and those who do not. Whether these kings are self-proclaimed monarchs or persons who legally inherited their crown is not explained. The fact that Israel becomes God’s crown and diadem makes them realize that their own crown is subject to the rule of God. That recognition will eventually determine their salvation. Crown and diadem seem to denote the male and female character of those God has saved and rehabilitated.

Israel will not just become what God had intended her to be: a kingdom of priests, but she will be God’s crown. God will be glorified in the splendor of those who have yielded their lives to Him. This also involves a renaming of Israel. As God changed Abram’s name into Abraham,<sup>4</sup> so every participant in God’s glory will be given a new name. Jesus promises a new name to those who overcome. In *Revelation*, we read what this new name stands for: “I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.”<sup>5</sup> And: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”<sup>6</sup>

V.4 describes this transformation in terms of the captivity and return to the Land of Promise. “Deserted” refers to a woman who has been rejected by her husband. The Hebrew word *`azuwbah*, “forsaken,” is only found in Isaiah. The meaning is particularly clear in: “ ‘The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife *deserted* and distressed in spirit — a wife who married young, only to be rejected,’ says your God.”<sup>7</sup> “Desolate” is the translation of the Hebrew word *shemamah* which particularly describes the condition of the land after a war has devastated it. The word is most frequently used in *Isaiah* and *Jeremiah* to describe the condition of Canaan after Nebuchadnezzar ransacked it.

The names Hephzibah and Beulah are a reversal of *`azuwbah* and *shemamah*. According to a footnote in *The New International Version*, “*Hephzibah* means my delight is in her” and “*Beulah* means

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1. Gen. 15:17,18
  2. Rom. 1:16,17
  3. See Isa. 49:7;52:15; 60:3,10,11,16.
  4. See Gen. 17:1-8.
  5. Rev. 3:12
  6. Rev. 22:4
  7. Isa. 54:6

married.” J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, remarks here: “The new names *Hephzibah* ... and *Beulah* ... are explained in the two halves of verse 5: respectively the wedding and the honeymoon. Zion’s *sons* make their marriage vow to their bride to ‘love and to cherish,’ to give themselves in devoted service to the welfare of Zion, and the Lord goes on honeymoon with his people, rejoicing over them. With such economy of words and beauty of imagery Isaiah depicts the loving unanimity that characterizes Zion and her intimate union with the Lord – which Revelation 19:7 foresees as the marriage of the Lamb.” Some Bible scholars insist that “your sons” should be read as “your son.” The singular would appropriately represent the Messiah, as in the marriage of the Lamb.

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes about v.6: “God’s persevering grace guarantees that this beauty will be conferred on Israel at Christ’s second advent. Faithful and diligent prophets who call to mind God’s words (remembrancers, ASV) will persist in preaching and prayer until Messiah’s earthly kingdom is established. From that time on, no invasions will lay waste the crops of Palestine (a prediction which can only be fulfilled by an earthly Millennium).” Bible scholars have argued about the meaning of “watchmen.” Some believe they are prophets or priests, some angels. *The Pulpit Commentary* agrees with the latter, stating: “It is generally allowed that the ‘watchers’ in ... Daniel 4:13, 17, 23 are angels; and the same interpretation best suits the ‘watchmen’ of the present passage.” It must be noted though that the ministry of intercession is nowhere assigned to angels in the Bible. *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* adds to this: “Those who are stationed upon the walls are no doubt keepers of the walls; not, however, as persons whose exclusive duty it is to keep the walls, but as those who have committed to them the guarding of the city both within and without (Song of Sol. 5:7). The appointment of such watchmen presupposes the existence of the city, which is thus to be watched from the walls. It is therefore inadmissible to think of the walls of Jerusalem as still lying in ruins, as the majority of commentators have done, and to understand by the watchmen pious Israelites, who pray for their restoration, or ... angelic intercessors. The walls intended are those of the city, which, though once destroyed, is actually imperishable (Isa 49:16) and has now been raised up again. And who else could the watchmen stationed upon the walls really be, but prophets who are called *tsoophiim* (e.g., Isa 52:8), and whose calling, according to Ezek 33, is that of watchmen?”

In the reference of Ezekiel, pointed to above, God, after describing the duties of a watchman, says to the prophet: “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.”<sup>1</sup> These verses clearly point to human beings being watchmen, and they also explain the responsibility of intercessors to preach the Gospel and issue warnings to those who are perishing.

It is also clear from vv.6 and 7 that nothing God intends to do in terms of salvation of the world occurs without human intercession. God’s kingdom will not come without our prayer: “Your kingdom come.”<sup>2</sup> This is also implied in Amos’ statement: “When a trumpet sounds in a city, do not the people tremble? When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it? Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.”<sup>3</sup>

- ii. The Lord’s oath, summons and proclamation (62:8–12)

***8 The LORD has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: "Never again will I give your grain as food for your enemies, and never again will foreigners drink the new wine for which you have toiled;***

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1. Ezek. 33:7-9  
 2. Matt. 6:10  
 3. Amos 3:6,7

***9 but those who harvest it will eat it and praise the LORD, and those who gather the grapes will drink it in the courts of my sanctuary."***

***10 Pass through, pass through the gates! Prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway! Remove the stones. Raise a banner for the nations.***

***11 The LORD has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.'"***

***12 They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted.***

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces this section with: "This tailpiece has significant links with the foregoing testimony of the Anointed One (61:10 – 62:7). First, there is a picture of security of possession and assured enjoyment (8–9). Loss of crops was a familiar pre-exilic experience, and the denials of its recurrence would have spoken tellingly of secure tenure and enjoyment. Secondly, both Zion and the nations figured in the testimony, each looking forward to something yet to be experienced, something for which Zion prays and into which the nations will enter with praise (6–7). Now both *the people* (10a) and 'the peoples' (NIV *nations*, 10e) are summoned to take to the road as pilgrims. Thirdly, the promise was made that the desolate and forsaken would be married and cherished (4), and this is now the subject of a divine proclamation: salvation is coming (11) and the perfect Zion is in sight (12). In short, verses 8–12 confirm all that was promised or implied in 61:10 – 62:7."

When man fell in sin, we read that God cursed the ground: "To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ' 'You must not eat of it,' ' 'Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.'"<sup>1</sup> This was not the final consequence of human sin. As the human race increased upon the earth inter-human relationships deteriorated to the point where one nation would rob another of what had been produced through painful toil and by the sweat of their brow.

God's oath in vv.8 and 9 begins the process of restoration and healing of the nations and their relationships. The Hebrew word "to swear" *shaba* literally means: "to seven oneself," "as if by repeating a declaration seven times." The first time God swore by Himself in a similar way was to Abraham after the sacrifice of Isaac. We read: "The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, 'I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.'"<sup>2</sup>

It is obvious that this promise of protection has not yet been fulfilled in a literal sense. Even after the return from Babylonian captivity, Israel was under constant oppression from foreign powers. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD introduced a time of endless suffering and persecution that even the declaration of Israel's statehood in 1948 has not totally terminated. Both the worldwide blessing of Abraham's obedience and the ultimate protection of Israel's crop of grain and wine are awaiting their final and eternal fulfillment.

We find in the pictures of God's oath several elements that strongly suggest a spiritual application. The grain and wine have become more than means of daily sustenance since Jesus used them as symbols of His death on the cross and a promise of His return. The mention of the sanctuary as the place of consumption also speaks of more than mere taking of daily food.

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1. Gen. 3:17-19

2. Gen. 22:15-18

There were regulations for the priests regarding eating the parts that were their share of the offerings the people brought to the altar. We read: “These are the regulations for the grain offering: Aaron’s sons are to bring it before the LORD, in front of the altar. The priest is to take a handful of fine flour and oil, together with all the incense on the grain offering, and burn the memorial portion on the altar as an aroma pleasing to the LORD. Aaron and his sons shall eat the rest of it, but it is to be eaten without yeast in a holy place; they are to eat it in the courtyard of the Tent of Meeting.”<sup>1</sup> And the whole population was directed to the place where the tabernacle would be to celebrate the bringing of their tithes while consuming part of it. God told Moses: “But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling. To that place you must go; there bring your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, what you have vowed to give and your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. There, in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the LORD your God has blessed you.”<sup>2</sup>

This makes us understand that the text speaks of more than protection from hostile takeover by nations of foreigners. The promise is about uninterrupted fellowship with God by means of the death and resurrection of the Messiah of which the bread and wine have become symbols.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments on v.10: “Isaiah likes double imperatives in moments of high drama (51:9; 52:1, 11; 57:14), and the pilgrimage to Zion is something that captured his imagination (24:16; 25:1–9; 27:12–13; 35:1–10). Thus the invitation is issued, the roads resurfaced (*prepare*), the way unmistakable (*highway*), hindrances gone (*stones*) and a worldwide people summoned (*banner for the nations*, lit. ‘peoples’; cf. 11:10, 12; 49:22).”

There is no agreement among Bible scholars about the meaning of this verse. Some see in it a picture of the return from Babylonian captivity, interpreting “the gates” to be the gates of Babylon through which the people must go out. Others believe them to be the gates of Jerusalem through which the people go in. One problem with the latter interpretation, if taken literally, is that at the time of the people’s return, there were no gates of Jerusalem. Another problem is that the passing through the gates becomes an invitation to the nations of the world to follow. Another problem again is that the Hebrew word *‘am* (people) is used both for “people” as for “nations.” That would make those who go through the gates the same as those who are invited worldwide by the banner. If the verse speaks about the return from captivity, it does so symbolically, making the return an image of a spiritual pilgrimage to the place of God’s revelation. Using a similar passage<sup>3</sup> and applying it spiritually to believers in Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “We are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.’ ‘Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.’ ”<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, John the Baptist used a similar language, quoting an earlier portion of Isaiah,<sup>5</sup> as we read in Luke’s Gospel: “[John] went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: ‘A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘ ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’ ”<sup>6</sup>

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1. Lev. 6:14-16
  2. Deut. 12:5-7
  3. Isa. 52:11
  4. II Cor 6:16,17
  5. See Isa. 40.
  6. Luke 3:3-6

The Hebrew text of v.11 reads literally: "Behold, the LORD has proclaimed unto the ends of the world, say to the daughter of Zion, behold, your salvation comes; behold his reward is with him, and his work before him." The remarkable construction catches us by surprise. Those living at the ends of the world are the ones addressed here. This means that the Gospel has been preached to all nations and those nations are the ones to take the message of salvation back to those from whom it originated. Two of Jesus' New Testament statements come to mind: "Salvation is from the Jews,"<sup>1</sup> and "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Paul works out this theme in Romans, saying: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.'"<sup>3</sup> J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: "New Testament theology thinks here of the ever-imminent return of Jesus (Phil. 3:20–21; Heb. 9:28)."

The "they" in v.12 refers to Israel who has recognized her Messiah. She will be called "the Holy People," meaning that God has perfected His work of sanctification in her. *Barnes' Notes* observes here: "No name is so honorable as that; no one conveys so much that is elevated and ennobling as to say of one, 'He is one whom Yahweh has redeemed from sin and death and hell by atoning blood.' " When Isaiah received his call in the vision recorded earlier, he learned that holiness is expressed on earth as glory. He heard the seraphs call to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."<sup>4</sup> When God makes people holy, He shares His glory with them. That is why it is said of the New Jerusalem: "It shone with the glory of God."<sup>5</sup> If "they" in v.12 refers to Israel, "you" means those addressed in the previous verse, those living at the ends of the earth. They, together with Israel form the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb, shining with the glory of God.

e. The consummation: the Anointed One completes his task (63:1–6)

***1 Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? "It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save."***

***2 Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress?***

***3 "I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing.***

***4 For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and the year of my redemption has come.***

***5 I looked, but there was no one to help, I was appalled that no one gave support; so my own arm worked salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me.***

***6 I trampled the nations in my anger; in my wrath I made them drunk and poured their blood on the ground."***

In introducing this section, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "In 62:11 we were called to watch for a coming 'salvation,' which 62:12 personalized into the coming of One who had completed the saving work. Now we are invited right into that situation, and given a privileged position alongside watchmen on Zion's walls as a mysterious figure approaches majestically and proclaims the execution of *vengeance, redemption*

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1. John 4:22
  2. Matt. 24:14
  3. Rom. 11:25-27
  4. Isa. 6:3
  5. Rev. 21:11

and *salvation*. The message of the Lord's garments (59:16), given to his Anointed (61:10), is now proclaimed as completed, exactly as in the vengeance and salvation greeted with the resounding hallelujahs of Revelation 19:1–8."

Isaiah directed us earlier to God's judgment over Edom in a passage that seems to present as many problems of interpretation as the one before us. We read: "My sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; see, it descends in judgment on Edom, the people I have totally destroyed. The sword of the LORD is bathed in blood, it is covered with fat — the blood of lambs and goats, fat from the kidneys of rams. For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah and a great slaughter in Edom. And the wild oxen will fall with them, the bull calves and the great bulls. Their land will be drenched with blood, and the dust will be soaked with fat."<sup>1</sup>

In connection with that passage, we observed: "Edom's quarrel with Israel was more than a war between two neighboring countries; it was symbolic for man's resistance against God's revelation. Edom's father, Esau, sold his birthright to Jacob. He was not interested in God's blessing."

And: "A problem of interpretation obviously occurs when the words are taken literally. Since Edom was a place on earth, the extermination of Edom must take place on earth. The words remind us of Paul's statement: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."<sup>2</sup> The course of life on earth is determined by what happens in heaven. But also, the heavenly scene is influenced by human choices and acts on earth. Paul's advice to put on the full armor would otherwise be futile. Job's story indicates that there is a relationship between what happens in heaven and on earth. This does not mean that human behavior is governed by the stars, but that events that occur in heaven cast their shadow upon the earth."

Commenting on "Edom" and "Bozrah," J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "*Edom* is the ceaseless foe (Am. 1:11), typical of David's victories (2 Sa. 8:13–14), the final eschatological enemy (34:5; Ezk. 35). Just as the Servant is David (55:3), so the Anointed One comes now like David as the Victor over Edom. But *Edom* means 'red,' matching the reddening garments (2), and *Bozrah*, its capital city, means 'vintage,' matching the winepress motif (2). The chosen foe and the just requital match each other. But, as yet, the watchmen can see only generalities: first, his *garments* – not *stained crimson* (the word *hāmūs* means 'sharpened,' indicating the 'sharp' colors they see in the distance), but his 'vivid garments'; secondly, his *splendor* – no bedraggled figure this, but 'majestic'; thirdly, his gait – *striding forward*, the purposeful and energetic walk of One who is confident; and fourthly, his *strength*. There is no weakness, nor even – notwithstanding that he comes, as we will learn, from battle – tiredness. *Greatness* is more exactly 'abundance.' He is brimming with vigor."

The image of the winepress in Scripture generally represents God's judgment over the sins of the world. This is a recurring theme all through the Bible. The focal point of God's judgment was at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He stands central as the One who not only trod the winepress of God's wrath but who was Himself crushed in the process like the grapes of wrath. This is expressed in passages like: "I looked, but there was no one to help, I was appalled that no one gave support; o my own arm worked salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me." (V.5).

"I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one 'like a son of man' with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, 'Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.' So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested. Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, 'Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from

1. Isa. 34:5-7

2. Eph. 6:10-12

the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe. The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia."<sup>1</sup>

And: "I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. 'He will rule them with an iron scepter.' He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS."<sup>2</sup>

As we look at these various Scripture portions above, we may conclude that they speak of two separate demonstrations of God's wrath, one in which God takes upon Himself the brunt of His fury in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and the other in which judgment falls upon that part of mankind that refuses to accept the fact that payment for their sin had been made by Christ. As *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: "A Christ-rejecting, Gospel-spurning world leaves the Lord no other alternative but to send fearful and terrible destruction when the time of his longsuffering is past."

There is also in the image of the winepress a double feature of the severity of the process and the sweetness of the result. After all, the winepress produces "wine that gladdens the heart of man."<sup>3</sup> Wine flows through the Scripture as a remembrance of our salvation in the death of our Lord and as an image of the Holy Spirit, both sources of joy unspeakable.

Finally, the whole picture is one of victory. The apparent defeat of Jesus' death on the cross turned out to be the greatest victory of all time. The final treading of the winepress will open the way for the full revelation of God's glory, when He will be all in all.

All this is given to us in this dialogue in which Isaiah inquires of God what He is doing and God gives him this glorious answer. Having predicted the captivity and provided comfort for those who would be led away, this picture is the most convincing assurance that God is Victor and that in Him we are more than conquerors.

## XII. THE NEW HEAVEN AND NEW EARTH: PRAYERS AND PROMISES (63:7 – 66:24)

### a. A 'remembrancer' at prayer (63:7–64:12)

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: "The theme of these chapters is the praying people (63)<sup>7</sup> – 64:12) and the promising God (65:1 – 66:24). The somber passage 63:1–6 described the requital of every foe and the redemption of all the saved. What can possibly remain? Only prayer for its fulfillment, resting on the sure promises of God."

#### i. Remembering (63:7–14)

***7 I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us — yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses.***

***8 He said, "Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me"; and so he became their Savior.***

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1. Rev. 14:14-20  
 2. Rev. 19:11-16  
 3. Ps. 104:15

**9 In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.**

**10 Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them.**

**11 Then his people recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and his people — where is he who brought them through the sea, with the shepherd of his flock? Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them,**

**12 who sent his glorious arm of power to be at Moses' right hand, who divided the waters before them, to gain for himself everlasting renown,**

**13 who led them through the depths? Like a horse in open country, they did not stumble;**

**14 like cattle that go down to the plain, they were given rest by the Spirit of the LORD. This is how you guided your people to make for yourself a glorious name.**

Motyer observes here, by way of introduction: “In 62:6, the Anointed One, zealous for the realization of the worldwide glory of Zion, posted watchmen-intercessors to pray till all was fulfilled. They are described there as ‘you who call on the LORD,’ literally ‘you who keep the Lord in remembrance.’ The same word now occurs in the singular (63:7): ‘I will keep (someone) in remembrance’ (*I will tell*, NIV). Here is the watchman-intercessor at his task. Typically of Bible prayers, the ‘remembrancer’ begins by ‘telling God about God’ (63:7–14) before turning to intercession (63:15 – 64:12). (Cf. Ne. 9:6ff.; Dn. 9:4; Acts 4:24–30).”

The Hebrew text of v.7, when read literally, sounds more powerful than any translation can make it: “The lovingkindnesses of the LORD I will mention, [and] the praises of the LORD according to all that has bestowed on us the LORD and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which he has bestowed on them.” As *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “The plurals and the repetitions imply that language is inadequate to express the full extent of God’s goodness.”

Many Bible scholars don’t know where to place these verses historically, so they put them in the period of the Babylonian captivity and make them the prayers of the people in captivity, much like Daniel’s prayer of confession.<sup>1</sup> If we want to preserve the unity of *Isaiah* however, we must assume that the one who prays here is the prophet himself. It is only partially a prayer in that it is not uniquely addressed to God, as real prayer ought to be. Isaiah clearly wants the people around him to hear him pray and draw their own conclusions. Actually, Isaiah may have had a triple purpose in mind: in addressing God, he conveys a message to his contemporaries and, in writing down his prophecy, he provides future generations in captivity with a prayer to pray. Had his contemporaries really understood the message and prayed this prayer of confession after him, there would never have occurred a captivity.

To invoke the history of salvation, as Isaiah does here in remembering the lovingkindnesses of God in the past, is a good exercise in times of trouble. We find another example of this in the Psalm Ethan the Ezrahite wrote. Having begun with the praise: “I will sing of the LORD’s great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations. I will declare that your love stands firm forever, that you established your faithfulness in heaven itself,”<sup>2</sup> reminding God of His promises, the Psalmist continues: “But you have rejected, you have spurned, you have been very angry with your anointed one. You have renounced the covenant with your servant and have defiled his crown in the dust. You have broken through all his walls and reduced his strongholds to ruins. All who pass by have plundered him; he has become the scorn of his neighbors. You have exalted the right hand of his foes; you have made all his enemies rejoice. You have turned back the edge of his sword and have not supported him in battle. You have put an end to his splendor and cast his throne to the ground. You have cut short the days of his youth; you

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1. See Dan. 9.

2. Ps. 89:1,2

have covered him with a mantle of shame.”<sup>1</sup> And he concludes with the cry: “How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire?”<sup>2</sup>

All this would find its climax when Jesus hung on the cross and recited to Himself David’s Psalm, crying: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>3</sup>

Having reminded himself of God’s lovingkindness, Isaiah steps, so to speak, into God’s shoes and looks at the people of God with God’s eyes. It seemed inconceivable that human beings, who had experienced salvation in such a dramatic and miraculous way, as the people had who were led out of Egypt, would turn their back to God and deny everything they knew experientially to be true. But they did!

In v.9 Isaiah goes back to his previous prophecies about the suffering Servant who identified Himself totally with the suffering of His people. *Barnes’ Notes* observes about “In all their distress he too was distressed”: “This is a most beautiful sentiment, meaning that God sympathized with them in all their trials, and that he was ever ready to aid them. This sentiment accords well with the connection; but there has been some doubt whether this is the meaning of the Hebrew. Lowth renders it ... ‘It was not an envoy, nor an angel of his presence that saved him.’ Noyes, ‘In all their straits they had no distress.’ The Septuagint renders it, ‘It was not an ambassador ... nor an angel ... but he himself saved them.’ Instead of the present Hebrew word *tsaar*, ‘affliction’), they evidently read it, *tsiyr*, ‘a messenger.’ The Chaldee renders it, ‘Every time when they sinned against him, so that he might have brought upon them tribulation, he did not afflict them.’ The Syriac, ‘In all their calamities he did not afflict them.’ This variety of translation has arisen from an uncertainty or ambiguity in the Hebrew text.”

These textual problems aside, it must be noted that God involved Himself more deeply in Israel’s distress, or in the suffering of all mankind than by merely sympathizing with them, as *Barnes’ Notes* suggest. “He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows ... He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”<sup>4</sup> He identified Himself completely with the sinful human race to the point where He became the Lamb that carries away the sins of the world.<sup>5</sup>

“The angel of his presence” is an unusual expression. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “ ‘The angel of his presence’ occurs nowhere but in this place. It is probably equivalent to ‘the angel of God’ (...Exodus 14:19; ...Judges 15:6; ...Acts 27:23), or ‘the angel of the Lord’ (...Genesis 16:7; ...Numbers 22:23; ...Judges 13:3, etc.), and designates either the Second Person of the Trinity, or the highest of the angelic company, who seems to be the archangel Michael.” Since the angel of His presence, (literally “the angel of His face) brings about salvation, we do well to identify Him with the Messiah.

The Hebrew word *‘ahabah*, “love,” is more often used to describe human relationships rather than God’s emotional attachment. We find it in Moses’ message to Israel: “But it was because the LORD *loved* you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew word for “pity,” *chemlah* is only found in one other place in Scripture, when the angel evacuated Lot and his family out of Sodom. We read: “When [Lot] hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the LORD *was merciful* to them.”<sup>7</sup>

Isaiah basically reaches back in history to the Exodus story to emphasize the fact that the people of his day owed their existence to the fact that God saved them out of slavery and gave them freedom, dignity

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1. Ps. 89:38-45
  2. Ps 89:46
  3. Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46
  4. Isa. 53:4,5
  5. See John 1:29
  6. Deut. 7:8
  7. Gen. 19:16

and identity. He also stresses the fact that Israel's rebellion dates back to her early history. From the very beginning, while they were barely out of bondage, they turned against the Lord. The whole forty-year desert crossing illustrates this.

The expression "grieved his Holy Spirit" has a New Testament ring for us because of Paul's admonition: "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."<sup>1</sup> It places us as New Testament Christians in Isaiah's text, making us realize what will happen to us when we cause pain to the Holy Spirit with our careless behavior.

*The New International Version*, in a footnote, gives an alternate reading to "Then his people recalled," stating: "But may he recall." J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, suggests the rendering "And he remembered." That *Commentary* continues: "Note the sequence: 'they rebelled ... he turned ... he remembered.' In the thick of their rebellion and his holy revulsion, the Lord's mind returned to basics. *Moses* would 'remind' the Lord of his purpose to save (Ex. 3:7-8); *his people* would remind him of his saving achievement (Ex. 6:6-7). *Where ... ?* introduces a divine soliloquy, as if the Lord were meditating, 'Why am I different now from what I was then?' *The sea*: the Red Sea deliverance was the consummation of the saving work (Ex. 14:13, 30-31)."

The question in v.11: "Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them" is legitimate; it had been asked before. Sometimes it is asked in a doubting and negative way as in: "My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'"<sup>2</sup> More positively, we read that Elisha, after witnessing the ascension of Elijah, "took the cloak that had fallen from him and struck the water with it. 'Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?' he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over."<sup>3</sup> The question made the power of the Holy Spirit immediately available to him. Gideon asked the question when the Lord called him. We read: "When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, 'The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.' 'But sir,' Gideon replied, 'if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, ' 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' ' But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian.' "<sup>4</sup> The examples, as well as the text before us, seem to suggest that the one recalling the facts of the history of salvation is Israel, rather than God. God is the One addressed here, as is obvious from "This is how you guided your people to make for yourself a glorious name" (v.14).

If we assume that Isaiah said all this centuries before the captivity occurred, the question is why? The people the Lord liberated from Egypt were not a willing and obedient nation; they were stiff-necked and hard-hearted. Moses had to remind them: "Remember this and never forget how you provoked the LORD your God to anger in the desert. From the day you left Egypt until you arrived here, you have been rebellious against the LORD."<sup>5</sup> If Isaiah could bring the people to look at themselves and see themselves as God saw them, and if they confessed their hard-heartedness, the captivity would never have occurred.

The text also would prove to be important to those who would go into captivity. It would make them understand the reason for God's dealing with them and give them hope, because they would understand that God had not given up on them. Reminding God of His glory is often an effective way to make Him respond to the need of the moment.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes here: "Behind all this review lies one fundamental assumption: the Lord does not change; what he was then he still is. It is to this thought that the remembrancer finally comes (14cd). First, *guided* sums up the whole course from slavery in Egypt, through redemption, shepherding care, removal of barriers, in Canaan. Such love! Such forbearance! Such power! Was it all for

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1. Eph. 4:30
  2. Ps. 42:3
  3. II Kings 2:14
  4. Judg. 6:12,13
  5. Deut. 9:7

nothing? Secondly, *your people* recalls that the exodus redemption set up a permanent relationship which (8, 11) has not changed. True, they have never lived up to their dignity, but are they not still loved with a never-changing love (7)? Thirdly, it was all designed to reveal the Lord's 'name of beauty,' a task he will never desert."

ii. Asking (63:15–64:12)

**15** *Look down from heaven and see from your lofty throne, holy and glorious. Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us.*

**16** *But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.*

**17** *Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance.*

**18** *For a little while your people possessed your holy place, but now our enemies have trampled down your sanctuary.*

**19** *We are yours from of old; but you have not ruled over them, they have not been called by your name.*

**Chapter 64:1** *Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!*

**2** *As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!*

**3** *For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.*

**4** *Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.*

**5** *You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved?*

**6** *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*

**7** *No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins.*

**8** *Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.*

**9** *Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people.*

**10** *Your sacred cities have become a desert; even Zion is a desert, Jerusalem a desolation.*

**11** *Our holy and glorious temple, where our fathers praised you, has been burned with fire, and all that we treasured lies in ruins.*

**12** *After all this, O LORD, will you hold yourself back? Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure?*

The above verses are among the most impassioned plea in all of *Isaiah*, maybe in all of Scripture. We understand why some Bible scholars believe that an eyewitness of the Babylonian captivity wrote the words, but one of the characteristics of the gift of prophecy is the ability to experience emotionally the events that will occur at a future date. There is no reason to believe that Isaiah did not write this a century or more before the predicted events had become a reality. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* comments here: "The foregoing praises were intended as an introduction to this prayer, which is continued to the end of the next chapter, and it is an affectionate, importunate, pleading prayer. It is calculated for the time of the captivity. As they had promises, so they had prayers, prepared for them against that time of need, that they might take with them words in turning to the Lord, and say unto him what he himself taught them to say, in which they might the better hope to prevail, the words being of God's own indicting. Some good interpreters think this

prayer looks further, and that it expresses the complaints of the Jews under their last and final rejection from God and destruction by the Romans; for there is one passage in it (Isa 64:4) which is applied to the grace of the gospel by the apostle (1 Cor 2:9), that grace for the rejecting of which they were rejected.”

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states about vv. 15-19: “These verses present the supplication of the repentant backsliders that God would cease from his estrangement and once again show his tender love (even if Abraham and Jacob disowned them because of their infidelity).”

The force and passion of this prayer is based on the premise that God, the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth, the One who sits enthroned in heaven is the Father of the people of Israel. Isaiah goes straight into the throne room, not as a subject who seeks an audience, but as a son who needs to speak to his father. “Abraham does not know us” and “Israel acknowledge us” may, as *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* suggests, refer to a moral judgment Israel’s ancestors would pronounce on their offspring, but it can also mean that these forefathers are not aware of the existence of their progeny. Isaiah may have had in mind David’s words: “Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.”<sup>1</sup>

V.17 seems to lay the blame for Israel’s hardness of heart upon God. There are several ways to look at this problem. The first thought that comes to mind is the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. We read: “But the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said to Moses.”<sup>2</sup> But this happened only after Pharaoh had first hardened his heart himself. God did not harden a heart that had been softened earlier; He confirmed an existing condition and made it irreversible. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, appropriately explains: “*Make us wander* is not an attempt to lay the blame on the Lord, rather a recognition that the guilt of his people is such that the Lord had no option but to drive them from him and into the far country of sin which they had chosen. Likewise *harden our hearts* does not blame the Lord for our sin. The heart choosing disobedience hardens progressively against God’s way until the moment (known only to God and fixed by him) comes when the point of no return is reached, when the final, decisive choice of sin is made. When this point is passed the situation is humanly irretrievable: only God can change it – if only he will *return*.”

Hidden in these statements is the recognition that we cannot bring about our own salvation. If the Holy Spirit does not bring about new life in our hearts there will be no regeneration. Jeremiah uses a similar language, saying: “I have surely heard Ephraim’s moaning: ‘You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined. Restore me, and I will return, because you are the LORD my God.’ ”<sup>3</sup> *The New Living Translation* expresses this more clearly as: “I have heard Israel saying, ‘You disciplined me severely, but I deserved it. I was like a calf that needed to be trained for the yoke and plow. Turn me again to you and restore me, for you alone are the LORD my God.’ ” This does not reduce us to robots who have no choice to determine the direction of life. After all, “turn me” is a prayer. It is the realization that only God can overcome our innate unwillingness to turn to Him, which He does when we ask. As the Apostle Paul states that “it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a way in which Isaiah has turned reality upside down in these verses. As we saw, it is not God who causes us to sin and go astray; we are the ones who have lost the way. God has not turned away from us either; we turned from Him, which means that we are the ones that should return, not God. What Isaiah describes is the way we experience our condition. When we sin against God we lose the sense of His presence. That does not annul God’s omnipresence, it dulls our sense of reality.

Vv.18 and 19 are not proof of a post-exilic prophecy. Israel possessed the holy place when they recognized that the glory of the Lord was present there. It was when they turned away from their worship of

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1. Ps. 27:10
  2. Ex. 9:12
  3. Jer. 31:18
  4. Phil. 2:13

God and put idol images where God had been, that they lost possession and the enemy took over. Ezekiel's prophecies indicate that this happened before the temple building was physically destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

There seem to be some linguistic problems that make v.19 difficult to translate. *The New International Version* gives an alternate reading in a footnote: "We are like those you have never ruled, like those never called by your name." J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "Verse 19 is not straightforward to translate but, more literally rendered, says, 'For a long time we have been those you did not rule over, on whom your name had not been called.' The Hebrew virtually makes clauses into titles: 'We have become ' 'You did not rule them.' ' This is the essence of the 'land of wandering,' entered when the Lord judicially imposes the consequences of sin: it is as though they are now beyond the pale of his kingdom and guardian care and have lost the intimacy of the shared name."

In the first three verses of chapter 64, Isaiah asks for a repeat of the scene at Mount Sinai when God proclaimed Israel to be a kingdom of priests. We read: On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up and the LORD said to him, 'Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them.' "<sup>2</sup> The author of *Hebrews* recalls the scene, saying: "You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: 'If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.' The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, 'I am trembling with fear.' "<sup>3</sup>

Isaiah seems to infer that if God would only manifest His glory in such visible manner, Israel would be converted instantaneously. Unfortunately, history does not back him up on that. A few days only after God's revelation on Mount Sinai, the people made the gold calf and gave themselves to idolatry! If God would repeat history, history would repeat itself in that also. When, in New Testament times, God rent the heavens and came down, we read: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."<sup>4</sup>

Isaiah's exclamation must be seen against the background of the Babylonian captivity and the destruction of the temple. Seeing that scene of death with a prophetic eye, he realizes that this would not have happened if God had revealed Himself to Israel at that time as He had in the past. As J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: "The rules of Hebrew require that verse 1 refer to the past: 'Oh that you had rent ... !' Isaiah has been reviewing a tragic past (17-19). It didn't have to be like that; the Lord's mere presence would have altered everything!" Since the demolition of the temple symbolizes the death of God's revelation, as embodied in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, we can say that God did in fact rent the heavens and came down in Jesus' resurrection.

It is this victory over death, sin and Satan, the greatest victory ever won in the universe, that makes us see the reality of God's salvation. Quoting Isaiah, the Apostle Paul, after having said: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him," adds: "but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God." The message

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1. See Ezek. 9-11.
  2. Ex. 19:16-22
  3. Heb. 12:18-21
  4. John 1:10,11

of the Gospel seems in fact too good to be true. If we have any inkling as to Who God is and who we are, it seems impossible that God would come down to our level and die our death so that we would be drawn up to His level and share in His eternal life and glory.

There is in Isaiah's words a hint of national pride. Foreseeing Israel's return from captivity, and knowing what had brought about that punishment, he shakes his head in unbelief at the revelation of God's grace.

The Hebrew text of v.4 reads literally: "For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor have perceived by the ear, neither the eye has seen, O God beside you, what he has prepared for him that waits for him." Isaiah puts down the condition for God to act as to wait for Him, to gladly do right and to remember God's ways. He sees God acting only in behalf of those who are obedient and righteous. He could not see yet, what the Apostle Paul would later discover, that "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."<sup>1</sup> The real miracle of amazing grace is that no ear has heard, no eye has seen and that no mind has conceived this. It is this fact that was hidden from the prophet that made him exclaim: "How then can we be saved?"

Yet, Isaiah had experienced this dilemma personally before, when he saw the glory of the Lord for the first time and reacted to that by crying out: "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."<sup>2</sup> The discovery of his lost condition became the prerequisite for his call. The principle remains true for us all: we will not discover how amazing God's amazing grace is until we recognize the wretchedness of our own condition.

In saying that "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" Isaiah may have excluded those in v.4 who "gladly do right" and follow God's way. It is the discovery that such a person does not exist, that the righteous acts of even the saints are stained, that elevates God's saving grace to the highest level.

The term "filthy rags," *beged`ed*, in Hebrew refers to menstrual cloth; in all of Scripture it is only used in this text of Isaiah. *The Pulpit Commentary* comments here: "A moral leprosy is upon us. We are like the leprous man, who has to rend his clothes, and to go about crying 'Tame! tame!' 'Unclean: unclean!' that those who hear may get out of his way. All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; or, *as a menstrual garment* (... Lamentations 1:17). In the best deeds of the best men there is some taint of evil. As Hooker says, 'Our very repentances require to be repented of.' " The imbedded reference to Lamentations read: "Zion stretches out her hands, but there is no one to comfort her. The LORD has decreed for Jacob that his neighbors become his foes; Jerusalem has become an unclean thing among them."

The thought that every person becomes like a leper in the sight of God is akin to Jesus' demand that we take up our cross and follow Him. In the Roman Empire only outcasts were killed by crucifixion. When Jesus was crucified, He became such an outcast, not only in the sight of man but even of God. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' "<sup>3</sup> In considering ourselves to be crucified with Christ, we identify with the scum of this earth. The first step to salvation and rehabilitation is in understanding our real condition before God. In the case of the leper, he would be pronounced "clean" when the disease covered his whole body. We read: "If the disease breaks out all over his skin and, so far as the priest can see, it covers all the skin of the infected person from head to foot, the priest is to examine him, and if the disease has covered his whole body, he shall pronounce that person clean. Since it has all turned white, he is clean."<sup>4</sup> The divine paradox consists of the fact that God pronounces us clean when we see ourselves as totally sinful. A clear understanding of our sinful condition is a crucial part in the process of our sanctification. God

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1. Rom. 5:8
  2. Isa. 6:5
  3. Gal. 3:13
  4. Lev. 13:12,13

reveals His love only to the ungodly. As the Apostle Paul states: “To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”<sup>1</sup>

In connection with v.8, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “In his holy hostility to sinners, the Lord is unchanged, but he is also unchanged in grace and mercy – and therein lies the ground for continuing pleading.” The image of the potter and the clay does not only stand for the recognition of God as being our Creator, but it is also a picture of surrender. This comes through more clearly in Jeremiah’s prophecy when he visited the potter’s house and heard God speak. We read: “Then the word of the LORD came to me: ‘O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?’ declares the LORD. ‘Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.’”<sup>2</sup> If we tell the Lord that we agree with the picture and consider ourselves to be as clay in His hands, we say to Him that He can do with our lives what He wants. It expresses also confidence that God will finish in us the work He has begun. As David says: “The LORD will fulfill [his purpose] for me; your love, O LORD, endures forever — do not abandon the works of your hands.”<sup>3</sup>

As J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, writes: “The relationship of *Father* (8) to his children is permanent: through all the vicissitudes of family life the relationship itself cannot be erased. The potter cannot disown the pot – it is there only because he made it – nor can the artisan (*your hand*) disown the artifact (*work*). Again, this is not to shift blame on to God for our failure, but to assert a permanent relationship – the love of the father, the sovereign decision of the potter, the skill of the craftsman. The children may always ask to come home; the pot may seek refashioning in the hand of the potter.” The apostle Paul must have had Isaiah’s image in mind when he wrote to the Romans: “Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath — prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory— even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?”<sup>4</sup> What Isaiah is asking is, to use Paul’s words, “Do not make us objects of Your wrath.”

“Do not be angry beyond measure” is a good translation of the Hebrew “Be not wroth O LORD, neither very sore.” There is a hidden acknowledgment in these words that our sins are so terrible in the sight of God that His anger could crush and annihilate us. As the author of Hebrews expresses: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”<sup>5</sup> Understanding of the depth of sin kindles this kind of fear in the human heart. David, having experienced the depth of God’s grace came to a different conclusion. He sang in one of his Psalms: “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.”<sup>6</sup> Isaiah, having seen with a prophetic eye the consequences of Israel’s rebellion, the devastation of Jerusalem and the temple, had not come to this point yet.

We find the words “beyond measure” at the beginning of v.9 and the end of v.12. They are the translation of the Hebrew words *`ad me`od*, literally “very sore.” “Beyond measure” suggests that God’s

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1. Rom. 4:5
  2. Jer. 18:5,6
  3. Ps. 138:8
  4. Rom. 9:21-24
  5. Heb. 10:31
  6. Ps. 103:8-14

punishment would not fit the crime but go beyond it. Isaiah seems to be struggling with the thought that “the wages of sin is death.”<sup>1</sup> If our sin demands capital punishment, how can God go beyond that?

Commenting on “After all this...,” that is after the destruction of the temple, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “*After* suggests sequence in time (i.e. after these things have happened), but the Hebrew means ‘in response to such eventualities.’ The verb *hold back* appeared in 63:15 in the first stanza of the poem. There the intercessors knew themselves to be the cause of the ‘withholding,’ but in the course of the poem sin has been exposed and the Lord has been sought in penitence. The wonder of repentance is that it works – so will not the Lord now leap into action and create a new situation that will transcend the ruins of the past? It is to this topic that Isaiah turns in the remaining two chapters.”

b. The Lord responding: sure promises, coming consummation (65:1–66:24)

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, gives this introduction to the final section: “These chapters provide a fitting conclusion both to The Book of the Conqueror (chs. 56 – 66) and indeed the book of Isaiah as a whole. The prayer of the remembrancer (63:7 – 64:12) ended with the Lord’s people waiting and longing for the remedial work of God. The ruins in which they find themselves living are the fruits of their own failure – all that was exposed in chapters 56 – 58 and acknowledged in 59:1–13. Only the coming of the Conqueror (59:14 – 63:6) can redeem the people, relieve them of their foes, and restore their fortunes. How great that restoration will be is now revealed.”

i. Pleading and provocation (65:1–10)

**1** *"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.'*

**2** *All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations —*

**3** *a people who continually provoke me to my very face, offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick;*

**4** *who sit among the graves and spend their nights keeping secret vigil; who eat the flesh of pigs, and whose pots hold broth of unclean meat;*

**5** *who say, 'Keep away; don't come near me, for I am too sacred for you!' Such people are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that keeps burning all day.*

**6** *"See, it stands written before me: I will not keep silent but will pay back in full; I will pay it back into their laps —*

**7** *both your sins and the sins of your fathers," says the LORD. "Because they burned sacrifices on the mountains and defied me on the hills, I will measure into their laps the full payment for their former deeds."*

**8** *This is what the LORD says: "As when juice is still found in a cluster of grapes and men say, 'Don't destroy it, there is yet some good in it,' so will I do in behalf of my servants; I will not destroy them all.*

**9** *I will bring forth descendants from Jacob, and from Judah those who will possess my mountains; my chosen people will inherit them, and there will my servants live.*

**10** *Sharon will become a pasture for flocks, and the Valley of Achor a resting place for herds, for my people who seek me.*

This passage has divided Bible scholars throughout the ages into camps that interpret “those who did not ask for me” to be the nation of Israel and others who believe the words refer to the Gentiles. Of great

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1. See Rom. 6:23.

importance in determining the meaning is the way in which the Apostle Paul quotes Isaiah in his Epistle to the Romans. Having said: “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,’” the Apostle continues: “Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, ‘I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.’ And Isaiah boldly says, ‘I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.’ But concerning Israel he says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.’”

<sup>1</sup> *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The application of the text by St. Paul (...Romans 10:20) to the calling of the Gentiles will be felt by all believers in inspiration to preclude the interpretation which supposes Israel to be the subject of ver. 1 no less than of vers. 2-7.”

*The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes: “Luther accordingly adopts this rendering: ‘I shall be sought by those who did not ask for me, I shall be found by those who did not seek me. And to the heathen who did not call upon my name, I say, Here am I, here am I.’ Zwingli, again, observes on v. 1, ‘This is an irresistible testimony to the adoption of the Gentiles.’ Calvin also follows the apostle’s exposition, and observes, that ‘Paul argues boldly for the calling of the Gentiles on the ground of this passage, and says that Isaiah dared to proclaim and assert that the Gentiles had been called by God, because he announced a greater thing, and announced it more clearly than the reason of those times would bear.’ Of all the Jewish expositors, there is only one, viz., Gecatilia, who refers v. 1 to the Gentiles; and of all the Christian expositors of modern times, there is only one, viz., Hendewerk, who interprets it in this way, without having been influenced by the quotation made by Paul.”

But *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* opines: “This is a scathing indictment of the hypocritical Jewish nation of Isaiah’s day, professing to be a holy and righteous people (v. 5), and yet practicing all the execrable abominations of the heathen. (This description would be altogether inappropriate for post-Exilic Israel, which had abandoned idolatry forever). 1. A nation ... not called by my name. The Gentiles (according to Rom 10:20-21), who would some day respond to the Gospel, while the covenant nation remained obdurately Christ-rejecting. Warnings and loving entreaties had proved unavailing; there was no other alternative but the well-deserved punishment of the Babylonian captivity (and of the Roman expulsion from Palestine in A.D. 135).”

Finally, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, offers this explanation: “The Lord asserts that he has taken the initiative towards people who neither asked for him nor sought him. Who are they? Majority opinion understands them to be Israelites who have failed to respond. The actual terms of the verse are, however, against this. There was no time when Israel could be described as a nation that *did not call on my name*, for there were always those who did call; even if we understand the words to imply ‘but not sincerely,’ the accusation is still too sweeping; and even if it were not, there is nothing in the Hebrew to warrant importing the required thought of insincerity. Furthermore, *did not call* alters MT (from *qôrä*’ to *qârä*’). MT says ‘*a nation not called by my name*,’ plainly excluding Israel who was called (43:7). On the other hand, the apparent meaning – the Lord’s call of grace to the Gentiles (Rom. 10:20) – forms here an inclusio with the reference to the nations who ‘have not heard of my fame’ and who gather to the Lord in 66:18–21. Towards these the Lord has taken an initiative: (lit.) ‘let myself be sought ... let myself be found.’ ... He has reached out through his word (*I said*), acted in self-revelation (*Here am I*, lit. ‘Behold me!’) and brought them within the embrace of the revelation granted to Israel (namely, Ex. 3:15). Looking back to the eunuch and alien in 56:1–4, 8, and the ingathering Gentiles of 60:3, Isaiah sees here the fruit of the extension of the gospel of God to all the world.”

In spite of all the convincing arguments in favor of the Gentiles and against Israel as the addressed, the text seems to constitute a condemnation of those who knew but did not act upon that knowledge. Words as “an obstinate people,” and “a people who continually provoke me to my very face” can hardly be applied to those who were not acquainted with God’s revelation of Himself.

1. Rom. 10:12,13, 19-21

A comparison of different translations of the Hebrew text shows that much can be suggested by the way some words are understood. While *The New International Version* reads: "I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I,' " *The New King James Version* states: "I was sought by those who did not ask for Me; I was found by those who did not seek Me. I said, 'Here I am, here I am,' To a nation that was not called by My name." It makes all the difference whether we interpret the Hebrew word *qara'* to mean: "called" or "was called."

The most important lesson of v.1 seems to be, not to whom it applies, but the principle revealed, which is that God reveals Himself to people who are not interested, whether they be Jew or Gentile. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."<sup>1</sup>

The little boy, who was asked how he found Jesus, answered best the question regarding "I was found by those who did not seek me." He said: "I didn't know Jesus was lost. But I was and He found me." There is a sense in which our finding of God turns out to be God's finding of us.

It needs little comment that the accusations in vv.1-5 cannot be applied very well to Gentiles but apply clearly to people who had received the law. The injunction of sacrifice in v.3 is a transgression of the law that states: "Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it."<sup>2</sup> "Sit among the graves" is a reference to witchcraft which was forbidden in the law that says: "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God."<sup>3</sup> Israel was forbidden to eat pork, according to the law that said: "And the pig, though it has a split hoof completely divided, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you."<sup>4</sup>

*The New International Version's* "I am too sacred for you!" is the rendering of the single Hebrew word *q<sup>a</sup>dashtiykaa*, which *The Hebrew Interlinear* interprets as "I am holier than thou!" J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments: "What the Lord forbade (Lv. 11:7, Dt. 14:8) they practiced (4cd), and cultivated a holiness of élitism, a first-class citizenship, and exclusivist approach to spirituality. No wonder such are a constant irritant, *smoke in my nostrils* (5cd)!" *The New Living Translation* brings this alive with: "Yet they say to each other, 'Don't come too close or you will defile me! I am holier than you!' They are a stench in my nostrils, an acrid smell that never goes away."

Isaiah wrote these words, as we saw earlier, centuries before the Babylonian captivity. Upon returning from Babylon, Israel's idolatry was never revived. But in the early New Testament days, Jesus reserved His sharpest condemnation for the Pharisees, who kept the law meticulously, but who were like smoke in God's nostrils. It has been said that God's greatest enemy is not Satan, but the Christian. Awareness of our sanctification can be the greatest hindrance to a holy life. When we preach the Gospel without living the life, we are also smoke in the nostrils of the world around us. Mahatma Gandhi's indictment still rings: "I would have become a Christian, if I had found one!"

"See, it stands written before me" (v.6) is a way of saying that God keeps a record of our acts. Daniel, recording his vision of God sitting on His throne, states: "Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened."<sup>5</sup> And

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1. Rom. 5:8
  2. Ex. 20:24,25
  3. Deut. 18:10-13
  4. Lev. 11:7

the Apostle John records the same scene in *Revelation*, saying: “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.”<sup>1</sup>

God’s law was also written: the Ten Commandments were written in stone, the rest of the moral and the ceremonial law was written on a scroll. Mankind has no excuse. The law that condemns us all is known to all. The only way to escape condemnation is to have one’s name recorded in the Book of Life.

The sin that provoked the Lord particularly was idolatry. It is the only sin of which the guilt is passed on from one generation to the next, as we see in the first of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.”<sup>2</sup> The reason for this is that idol worship opens a door for demonic spirits to enter into families and transfer from one generation to the next until their chain is broken by the power of Christ. It was this particular kind of idol worship that required human sacrifice that irritated the Lord more than any other human sin. Peter called this “the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers.”<sup>3</sup>

History repeated itself. God had said to Abraham that in his day “the sin of the Amorites [had] not yet reached its full measure.”<sup>4</sup> When that measure was filled, Israel entered Canaan to take possession of the land and exterminated its inhabitants. But Israel managed to fill up its measure of iniquity to a greater extent than Canaan’s original residents. We read about Manasseh that he led them astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites and that he did more evil than the Amorites who preceded him with their idolatry.<sup>5</sup>

Vv.10-12 reveal a different mood than the preceding verses. They give us some insight into God’s conflicting emotions in connection to Israel’s judgment to come. It is as if God cannot stand the idea of having to punish His people to the point of annihilation. According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, “The words are thought to be those of a well-known vintage-song, which is perhaps alluded to in the heading (*Al-taschith*) prefixed to Psalm 57, 58, and 59. Each of these psalms was probably sung to the air of this favorite song.’ ” Each of these Psalms mentioned have the heading “For the director of music. [To the tune of] ‘Do Not Destroy.’ ” We can imagine that, saying these words, God hums this tune that the harvesters of grapes would sing while going through the vineyard.

The grapes that form the content of the parable here are not first quality that any harvester would pick without having second thoughts. They are the kind they would leave on the vine or throw away because of their inferior quality. The beauty of these words, which is lost on us, would have been very meaningful to the people of Isaiah’s day. They easily recognized the proverbial character and the tune to which the words were sung.

The Hebrew text of v.9 reads literally: “And I will bring forth out of Jacob a seed and out of Judah an inheritor of my mountain. The Hebrew word for “seed” is *zera`*. We find it in the first prophecy of the Bible, predicting the coming of the Messiah: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”<sup>6</sup> “Inheritor” is the

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5. Daniel 7:10
  1. Rev. 20:12
  2. Ex. 20:3-6
  3. I Peter 1:18,19
  4. Gen.15:16
  5. See II Kings 21:9-11.

translation of the Hebrew verb *yarash*, which has the meaning of “heir,” but also of “to occupy by driving out previous tenants, and possessing in their place.” We find the first meaning in the verse in which God promises a son to Abraham: “Then the word of the LORD came to him: ‘This man will not be your *heir*, but a son coming from your own body will be your *heir*.’”<sup>1</sup> And the second meaning in: “*Drive out* all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places.”<sup>2</sup>

I find it difficult not to find a reference to the coming of the Messiah in this prophecy. The Apostle Paul seems to agree with this when he writes in Romans: “And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’”<sup>3</sup> Israel will be saved when Jesus returns and so will we all be. That His return will be in power and victory is contained in the second meaning of the word *yarash*.

Isaiah mentions two places that symbolize renewal: Sharon and the Valley of Achor. According to *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, Sharon is “a part of the coastal plain of Palestine extending from Joppa to Mt. Carmel, proverbially fertile and noted for its flowery beauty (Isa 35:2; Song 2:1). It has a width of six to twelve miles. The plain was well watered and was a garden spot (1 Chron 27:29). In modern Palestine it is dotted with citrus farms and numerous settlements. In antiquity it was a favorite caravan route along the sea, connecting Asia Minor, Egypt, and Mesopotamia.” The Valley of Achor was the place where Achan, who had stolen the banned spoils of Jericho, was put to death and buried.<sup>4</sup> Hosea prophesied that God would “make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.”<sup>5</sup>

ii. Contrasting destinies (65:11–16)

**11 "But as for you who forsake the LORD and forget my holy mountain, who spread a table for Fortune and fill bowls of mixed wine for Destiny,**

**12 I will destine you for the sword, and you will all bend down for the slaughter; for I called but you did not answer, I spoke but you did not listen. You did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me."**

**13 Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "My servants will eat, but you will go hungry; my servants will drink, but you will go thirsty; my servants will rejoice, but you will be put to shame.**

**14 My servants will sing out of the joy of their hearts, but you will cry out from anguish of heart and wail in brokenness of spirit.**

**15 You will leave your name to my chosen ones as a curse; the Sovereign LORD will put you to death, but to his servants he will give another name.**

**16 Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth; he who takes an oath in the land will swear by the God of truth. For the past troubles will be forgotten and hidden from my eyes.**

*The New International Version* does a good job translating the play-on-words in vv.11 and 12. The two Hebrew words *gad* and *meniy* are rarely used in the Old Testament. The latter is only found in Isaiah’s text, the former occurs only in the story of the birth of Jacob’s son Gad where we read: “Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Then Leah said, ‘What good *fortune!*’ So she named him Gad.”<sup>6</sup> *Gad* and *Meniy*

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6. Gen. 3:15

1. Gen. 15:4

2. Num. 33:52

3. Rom. 11:26,27

4. See Josh. 7:24-26.

5. Hos. 2:15

appear also to have been names of Canaanite idols that were worshipped as deities of fortune and fate. God makes the pun in v.12 by using *manah* instead of *meniy*, a change of vowels that are not written in Hebrew. The word means: “to count,” as in the verse: “I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could *count* the dust, then your offspring could be counted.”<sup>1</sup>

Their idolatry began with a move away from the place of God’s revelation. This was the sin Jeroboam committed when he moved the worship of God away from Jerusalem for fear that the people of the Northern Kingdom would return to the lordship of Rehoboam if they kept on going to the temple in Jerusalem. We read: “After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, ‘It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. And this thing became a sin; the people went even as far as Dan to worship the one there.”<sup>2</sup> This amounted to a shift of judgment as to who had the right to decide where God ought to be worshipped, God or man. It left the worship of God to man’s choice instead of God’s. That put God virtually on the level of an idol and opened a large door for idol worship on a larger scale.

The indictment in v.12 is that God called Israel but they ignored His voice and did not respond. This set Isaiah apart from the rest of the nation; when he heard the voice of God calling: “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” he had answered: “Here am I. Send me!”<sup>3</sup>

One of the differences between worship of God and idol worship is that God feeds man but man has to feed his idol. David said about God’s provision: “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.”<sup>4</sup> Fortune and Destiny had to be dined and wined.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah* comments on vv.13-16: “Verses 13–16 draw a conclusion (*Therefore*, 13), and the stark contrasts of the alternative destinies are worked out in verses 13–15. *My servants* looks back to ‘my servants,’ the remnant in 8–10, and *you* (masculine plural) continues from the address to ‘you’ in 11–12. Verse 16 states the outcome objectively. ... The contrasts of hunger and thirst picture the meeting of every physical need, and the use Isaiah makes of this motif transfers it to the realm of spiritual need and supply. The externality of eating and drinking is balanced by the internal contrast of *sing ... joy* and *cry out ... anguish* (14). To sing is to enter joyfully into proffered benefit, and those who do so find inner fulfillment. But, by contrast, those who refused the Lord, his word and his way (12c-f) find that they have condemned themselves to *shame* (disappointment, non-fulfillment), *anguish* (pain and grief at the very heart of experience), and *brokenness of spirit* (the break-down of every vital energy and purposeful activity). Even to recall those who rejected the Lord will be as bleak as dwelling on the Lord’s *curse* (15), which has reached its inevitable outcome in *death*.”

V.15 speaks about the heritage of a family name. Speaking against the background of a funeral, the Preacher in *Ecclesiastes* says: “A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth.”<sup>5</sup> The thought conveyed there is that a good reputation spreads a better aroma in death than embalment. The statement here is not made about an individual but about a nation. Israel was meant to be a model nation to which the world population would want to conform themselves. When Jacob pronounced his blessing upon the sons of Joseph, he said: “In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: ‘May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.’”<sup>6</sup> As it turned out the name “Jew” has become, for some, at some

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6. Gen. 30:10,11

1. Gen. 13:16

2. I Kings 12:28-30

3. Isa. 6:8

4. Ps. 145:15,16

5. Eccl. 7:1

points in history, the epitome of despicability that gave rise to pogroms and holocausts. In some people's vocabulary "to Jew" has become a verb with a pejorative meaning.

All this is the result of a broken fellowship with God. God made man to be the crown of creation. To be human was meant to be the most honorable state of existence imaginable. In practice, to be human has come to mean, to be weak, to be mortal. Sin has tainted our language and our philosophy of life. Therefore, God gives a new name to those who love Him. Jesus says to the church in Philadelphia: "Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name."<sup>1</sup>

*The New International Version* renders the first part of v.16 as: "Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth." Older versions read: "So that he who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by the God of truth."<sup>2</sup> J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "*Invokes a blessing* is reflexive, and this should be made explicit by adding 'on himself.' The same verb expresses the universal Abrahamic promise (Gn. 22:8; 26:4). The idea is of entering into the blessing appropriate to one's needs." "God of truth" is the translation of the Hebrew *Elohim Amen*. The blessing invoked pertains to our relationship with God, the oath relates to our fellowship with fellowmen. It is fellowship with God that makes us into people who are reliable in our association with others.

"The past troubles" speaks of the Babylonian captivity as a punishment for Israel's national sin. Those troubles can only be forgotten when the sin that caused them has been forgiven. Isaiah makes other reference to God's ability to forget our sins. When King Hezekiah was healed, he sang: "You have put all my sins behind your back."<sup>3</sup> And God Himself said to Isaiah: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more."<sup>4</sup> And in Micah's famous statement: "You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."<sup>5</sup>

iii. All things new (65:17–25)

**17 "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.**

**18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.**

**19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.**

**20 "Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.**

**21 They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.**

**22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands.**

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6. Gen. 48:20

1. Rev. 3:12

2. RSV, NKJV

3. Isa. 38:17

4. Isa. 43:25

5. Mic. 7:19

**23 They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them.**

**24 Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.**

**25 The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD.**

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, divides this section into three parts: 1- The new creation (65:17–18b), 2 – The new city (65:18c–20) and 3 – The new society (65:21–25).

### **1- The new creation – 65:17–18b**

The Apostle John saw the apocalyptic vision of this new heaven and a new earth and he heard God's voice that announced this new creation. We read: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'"<sup>1</sup> And the Apostle Peter confirms this with: "But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."<sup>2</sup>

If it is true that the creation we know now is actually a restoration of a former creation that was ruined when Lucifer sinned and became Satan, a hypothesis that is called "Gap theory," a new creation instead of the restoration of an old one would be a logical divine goal. Even the slightest reference to the origin of sin must be eradicated. And if there is even in the present sin-stained world in which we live, so much that makes life enjoyable and beautiful, what will a creation be in which no blight remains and glory can be experienced to the full without any limitation! When God wipes away every tear, He will also wipe out every memory of that which caused the tears.

### **2 – The new city – 65:18c–20**

The New Jerusalem, as John saw it, will turn out to be built with living stones, material saved from the old creation, a construction of human beings that is called "The Bride of the Lamb." The angel that introduces the Apostle John to her calls her: "the bride, the wife of the Lamb."<sup>3</sup> Usually, when a bride becomes wife, some of the freshness and sparkle of the wedding day fades into routine. Keeping "the bride" into "the wife" preserves the joy forever. Besides the wonderful description John gives of the New Jerusalem, the essence of the city is all caught up in the words "it shone with the glory of God."<sup>4</sup>

To describe in depth the meaning of the image, a city, a society of human beings in such close fellowship with God that only the intimacy of a marriage relationship comes close to it, defies all effort. The city of God will have all the convenience and security that we look for and it will also have all the freshness and beauty of life in the country that we long for. It will have the total of everything desirable to the point where everything we ever could desire turns out to be a vague image of an ultimate reality.

There are in this song about the creation of a new earth features that remain of the old creation that was soiled by sin, which, in our opinion, do not match the perfect condition of a new creation. Although v.20 must be read as a promise, there is no annihilation of death. The infant may live to be an old man, but the old

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1. Rev. 21:1-5

2. II Peter 3:13

3. Rev. 21:9

4. Rev. 21:11

man does die, even if he lives past a hundred years of age. The best way to understand this is to assume that Isaiah speaks about eternity in terms of time, which is the only language he knows.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “What is most remarkable in the description is that death and sin are represented as still continuing. Death was spoken of as ‘swallowed up in victory’ in one of the earlier descriptions of Messiah’s kingdom (... Isaiah 25:8). J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, suggests the following by way of explanation: “What we have no capacity to understand can be grasped only through what we know. In this present order, death cuts life off. Not so in the new Jerusalem: no *infant* will fail to come to maturity, nor the elderly be foiled of fulfillment. It is not meant to suggest that death will still be present. This would contradict *for ever* (18), *no more* (19) and the death of death in 25:7–8. It simply affirms that, over the whole of life, the power of death will be gone. The only exception is that (lit.) ‘the sinner, a hundred year old, will be accursed’ (20fg). There will, of course, be no sinners in the new Jerusalem (6–7, 12, 15c). We are again dealing with metaphor: even if, *per impossibile*, a sinner were to escape detection for a century, the curse would still search him out and destroy him. In reality, just as death will have no more power, so sin too will have no more place.”

### **The new society – 65:21–25**

The promise in these verses reverses the curse of disobedience to God’s law as God described to Moses: “But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it.”<sup>1</sup> The curse is reversed because disobedience no longer exists. As *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* comments: “They themselves will enjoy what they have worked for, without some one else stepping in, whether a countryman by violence or inheritance, or a foreigner by plunder or conquest (Isa 62:8), to take possession of that which they have built and planted ... for the duration of their life will be as great as that of trees (i.e., of oaks, terebinths, and cedars, which live for centuries), and thus they will be able thoroughly to enjoy in their own person what their hands have made.” And J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, adds: “The society to come will know security of tenure (21–22), fulfillment in blessing (23), peace with God (24) and total harmony (25).”

As in the previous section, Isaiah still struggles to describe the concept of eternal bliss without the limitations time puts on us. The scene is the same as the millennial kingdom described in an earlier chapter. We read there: “The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”<sup>2</sup> Even if people enjoy the same lifespan as a tree, there is a limit of existence. The problem of eternity for us is always that we only have the language of time to describe it.

The Preacher in *Ecclesiastes* said: “I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when he has a son there is nothing left for him. Naked a man comes from his mother’s womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand.”<sup>3</sup> That kind of pessimistic gloom is taken away in Isaiah’s vision. Life is no longer meaningless as it was for the Preacher, because “the knowledge of the LORD” will give meaning to it. Man’s relationship with God will be such that all prayers are answered instantaneously. Sin has been eradicated root, shoot and fruit.

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments upon the closing verses of this chapter: “The common thought in these verses is oneness: first, oneness with the Lord, as he anticipates their needs (24a) and, because they are in such harmony with his will, the words they use commend themselves to him for immediate action

1. Lev. 26:14-16
2. Isa. 11:7-9
3. Eccl. 5:13-15

(24b). Secondly, harmony prevails throughout creation (25), as Eden is restored (11:6–9), old enmities are gone (*wolf*), fears removed (*lamb*) and natures changed (*lion ... eat straw*). In 11:6–9 there is no reference to the great enemy of creation, the serpent (Gn.3:14), but it is accurately in place here. There is a point in the new creation where nothing changes: the curse upon sin still stands. The Lord is still the Holy God. *Neither harm nor destroy*: the positives of 25ab are strengthened by the negatives of 25de, ruling out both damage (*harm*) and destruction (*destroy*). The whole is *my holy mountain* (cf. 11), the place where the Lord in holiness dwells among his people, and they with him.”

iv. Judgment and hope (66:1–24)

*1 This is what the LORD says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?"*

*2 Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the LORD. "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.*

*3 But whoever sacrifices a bull is like one who kills a man, and whoever offers a lamb, like one who breaks a dog's neck; whoever makes a grain offering is like one who presents pig's blood, and whoever burns memorial incense, like one who worships an idol. They have chosen their own ways, and their souls delight in their abominations;*

*4 so I also will choose harsh treatment for them and will bring upon them what they dread. For when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, no one listened. They did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me."*

*5 Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at his word: "Your brothers who hate you, and exclude you because of my name, have said, 'Let the LORD be glorified, that we may see your joy!' Yet they will be put to shame.*

*6 Hear that uproar from the city, hear that noise from the temple! It is the sound of the LORD repaying his enemies all they deserve.*

*7 "Before she goes into labor, she gives birth; before the pains come upon her, she delivers a son.*

*8 Who has ever heard of such a thing? Who has ever seen such things? Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment? Yet no sooner is Zion in labor than she gives birth to her children.*

*9 Do I bring to the moment of birth and not give delivery?" says the LORD. "Do I close up the womb when I bring to delivery?" says your God.*

*10 "Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her.*

*11 For you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance."*

*12 For this is what the LORD says: "I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees.*

*13 As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."*

*14 When you see this, your heart will rejoice and you will flourish like grass; the hand of the LORD will be made known to his servants, but his fury will be shown to his foes.*

*15 See, the LORD is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.*

*16 For with fire and with his sword the LORD will execute judgment upon all men, and many will be those slain by the LORD.*

*17 "Those who consecrate and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following the one in the midst of those who eat the flesh of pigs and rats and other abominable things — they will meet their end together," declares the LORD.*

*18 "And I, because of their actions and their imaginations, am about to come and gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory.*

*19 "I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations — to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations.*

*20 And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD — on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels," says the LORD. "They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the LORD in ceremonially clean vessels.*

*21 And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites," says the LORD.*

*22 "As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the LORD, "so will your name and descendants endure.*

*23 From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me," says the LORD.*

*24 "And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."*

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, introduces Isaiah's last chapter with: "Chapter 66 is best understood by looking first at the shape of the whole. It begins (1–4) and ends (18–24) with the theme of the house of the Lord. In the opening section, Isaiah moves quickly from the house itself (1–2) to contrasting worshippers – those who 'tremble at my word' (2), and those who, though they engage in the ritual (3), do not answer when the Lord calls (4). In the closing passage, Isaiah starts with a worldwide pilgrimage bringing a pure offering to the Lord's house (18–21), and 'all mankind' keeping Sabbath (22–23). But, by contrast, there are those upon whom the final judgment of God has fallen (24). The two internal sections of the chapter deal respectively with these two groups of people: a message of assurance and hope for 'those who tremble' at the Lord's word (5–14), and the Lord's fiery judgment on the false worshippers (15–17). The Lord's 'house' is, of course, the 'place' where he comes to live at the center of his people's life. This is his 'tabernacle,' his tent-dwelling at the heart of his people's 'encampment.' As Isaiah teaches, there is but one proper response to the presence of this 'house' and its holy Occupant: do we tremble at his word, or do we refuse him when he calls?"

Motyer subdivides the chapter into eight parts: 1. The house and its people (66:1–4); 2. The word of God and eternal security (66:5–6); 3. Impossible for people, possible for God (66:7–9); 4. Joy and provision (66:10–11); 5. The world city of peace (66:12–13); 6. Settlement (66:14); 7. The holy and jealous God (66:15–17); 8. The new house at the center of the new creation (66:18–24).

### **1. The house and its people – vv. 1–4.**

When Isaiah received this Word from the Lord, Solomon's temple still stood and was still in use. Yet, the message he had conveyed in the last several chapters dealt with the Babylonian captivity and the return of the people after that, a period when the temple lay in ruin. As with Ezekiel's prophecy, Isaiah's book ends with a new temple, one that goes well beyond the building of stone, gold and glory that Solomon's structure had been. The opening words of this chapter echo Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"<sup>1</sup>

We know from the records of the rebuilding of the temple, that the new structure never equaled Solomon's edifice in beauty. We read in *Ezra*: "But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy."<sup>2</sup> And *Haggai* reports: "On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word

1. I Kings 8:27

2. Ezra 3:12

of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ‘Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, ‘Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?’<sup>1</sup>

The statement in v.1 about who God is reveals some of the extent of God’s glory, that which makes Him incomparable to any of His creatures. He is the One who sits on the throne in heaven, of Whom the Apostle John says: “There before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.”<sup>2</sup>

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments on vv.1-4: “Jehovah condemns externalism in worship. The Almighty needs no temples built by man to dwell in nor sacrificial animals for food (what a contrast to the pagan concept!). It is the repentant and believing heart that he requires. A valid sacrifice is a sacramental seal of faith. Apart from faith, the slaying of animals is as abominable to God as murder, or the offering of an unclean beast (v. 3). Those who turn away from his call will find to their sorrow that he will turn away from their call.”

The very thought that this God would need a place on earth to live comfortably is ludicrous. Not only would nothing that man made for God be comparable to the glory of His heavenly abode, but no one on earth would have the ability or the moral integrity to build it. When David conceived the plan to build a house for God to dwell in on earth, God responded by saying that not David would be the builder, but his son.<sup>3</sup> Actually, what God told him was that God would build him a house, instead of he building one for God. David understood this to mean that his son, Solomon, would be the builder. History proved, however, that Solomon was not the real builder, although he constructed an edifice that was a shadow of the heavenly reality; the real builder of God’s house on earth was David’s greatest son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Nobody else qualified.

The principle revealed in God’s dialogue with David still remains. No one on earth qualifies to build a place for the God of heaven and earth. God builds His own house on earth as a resting place, not so much for Himself as for us. “Resting place” is the translation of the Hebrew words *maqom menuwachah*. The word *menuwachah* describes a place of ease and comfort. Naomi used it to her two daughters-in-law, saying: “May the LORD grant that each of you will find *rest* in the home of another husband.”<sup>4</sup> And God used it to describe Canaan: “So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter *my rest*.’”<sup>5</sup> The writer of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* indicates that God’s rest consists of a relationship. We read: “Anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”<sup>6</sup> God’s resting place on earth is the place where we are at ease with Him. And it is the place God builds for us, not the place we build for Him, unless we speak about the human heart.

That is the topic of the second part of v.2. God’s resting place is in the heart of a person who is “humble and contrite in spirit.” The Hebrew text reads literally: “poor and of a contrite spirit.” “This is the one I esteem” literally reads in the Hebrew text: “To this [man] I will look,” meaning “this is the kind of person I am looking for.” Such a person would be the exception in the crowd God is actually looking at.

Speaking about v.3, J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: “Four pairs of permissible acts of worship are matched with impermissible ones. Throughout, the words *like* and *is like one who presents* (3f) are interpretative additions. Leaving them out, we find that Isaiah simply sets lawful and unlawful actions side by side without comment: one slaughters a bull, but one kills a man (*i.e.* sinful action); one sacrifices a lamb,

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1. Hag. 2:1-3
  2. Rev. 4:2,3
  3. See II Sam. 7:4-16.
  4. Ruth 1:9
  5. Ps. 95:11
  6. Heb. 4:10

but one strangles a dog (*i.e.* meaningless); one brings a gift of grain, but another brings pig's blood (*i.e.* unacceptable); one makes an incense memorial, someone else blesses an idol (*i.e.* apostate). According to Ezekiel 8, pre-exilic worship went hand in hand with just such deviations. Isaiah's purpose is to present the element of choice: the Lord has made his will known in his word. He is not repudiating the place and use of sacrifices (as the words, *like, etc.*, suggest); he is contrasting the revealed way in the matter of worship with human ways and his accusation (3ij) is that some have chosen and ordered their worship accordingly (*ways*); this is no outward formality but involves their hearts (*delight*). But to the Lord it was *abominations (shiqquwts)* – everything he detested!"

There seems, however, to be another way of looking at this description of Israel's sacrificial practices at that time. We could interpret the words to mean that the sacrifices brought become a crime instead of an atonement for sin, because of the condition of the human heart that brings them. Death in any form must have been an abomination to God. Even the death of an animal goes against the grain for Him who is the living God. The death of a sacrificial animal was only acceptable to God because He hated the death of man even more than the death of an animal and thus allowed it by way of substitution. But if man brings an animal sacrifice to God that is not backed up by a humble and contrite spirit, that is without an understanding of one's sinful condition, it becomes murder. Sin invokes God's curse. Yet, we read nowhere that God cursed Adam or Eve because of their sin. At the moment of confrontation, God said to Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you."<sup>1</sup> The only human being God ever cursed because of sin was Jesus Christ, of whom we read: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'"<sup>2</sup>

"Harsh treatment" is the rendering of the Hebrew word *ta'aluwl*. The word is only found twice in Isaiah. The other verse reads: "I will make boys their officials; mere *children* will govern them."<sup>3</sup> *The New King James Version* renders it: "So will I choose their *delusions*, And bring their fears on them." Since the word is used as a parallel to "what they dread," "harsh treatment" seems an acceptable translation. Moses' warning to Israel as to what would happen when they turned away from the Lord provides a good illustration of what is meant here. We read: "As for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight. They will run as though fleeing from the sword, and they will fall, even though no one is pursuing them."<sup>4</sup>

## 2. The word of God and eternal security vv. 5–6

Vv.5 and 6 are words of comfort for those who take the Word of God seriously, who listen to Him and answer His call. They tremble at the Word of God. The Hebrew verb for "to tremble" is *chared*, which is the same word Isaiah used in v.2 about those who are "humble and contrite in spirit and *trembles* at my word." These people were ostracized by their fellowmen who used their religion as a cover-up for their sinful practices. They demonstrated the same hatred that Cain felt for his brother Abel.<sup>5</sup> "Exclude you" is the rendering of the Hebrew word *nadah*, "to toss," or "to banish." This is the only place Isaiah uses the word. It may mean that the true believers were treated as second-class citizens who were denied their civil rights.

"Let the LORD be glorified, that we may see your joy!" is the same kind of taunt the sons of Korah expressed in one of their Psalms: "My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'"<sup>6</sup> There are situations in which God's children fail to exhibit the joy of the Lord, in which case the outside world rightfully says: "We cannot see by the way you live that what you proclaim is true."

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1. Gen. 3:17
  2. Gal. 3:13
  3. Isa. 3:4
  4. Lev. 26:36
  5. See Gen. 4:3-8.
  6. Ps. 42:3

“Let the LORD be glorified” is the rendering of the Hebrew *kabad Yahweh*. *Kabad* is a strange word. Its original meaning is “to be heavy,” which, in a bad sense, can mean: “to be burdensome,” “to be severe,” or “to be dull.” In a good sense it can mean: “to be numerous,” “to be rich,” or “to be honorable.” The Apostle Paul used this Hebrew idiom in Greek when he wrote to the Corinthians: “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”<sup>1</sup> *The King James Version* reads: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”

But in the context in which Isaiah uses it, the multiple meaning of the word adds to the insulting way it is used. This is very difficult to render correctly in English.

The Lord obviously takes the words as a direct insult and promises revenge upon those who used them. The sound that is heard from the temple comes from the inner sanctum. It is like the roaring of a lion, as Amos prophesied: “The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers.”<sup>2</sup>

Not all Bible scholars interpret “Let the LORD be glorified” as a taunt. *Barnes’ Notes*, for instance, believes that it refers to the misconception of those who believed that they were honoring God by stamping out certain manifestations of worship. We read: “That is, they profess to do it to honor God; or because they suppose that he requires it. Or it means, that even while they were engaged in this cruel persecution, and these acts of excommunicating their brethren, they professed to be serving God, and manifested great zeal in his cause. This has commonly been the case with persecutors. The most malignant and cruel persecutions of the friends of God have been originated under the pretext of great zeal in his service, and with a professed desire to honor his name. So it was with the Jews when they crucified the Lord Jesus. So it is expressly said it would be when his disciples would be excommunicated and put to death (John 16:2). So it was in fact in the persecutions excited by the Jews against the apostles and early Christians.” And J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, states: “They really thought that the name of the Lord was more truly understood and more perfectly honored in their self-chosen theologies than by loyalty to the Lord’s word. In particular, the ‘word tremblers’ profess a coming *joy*, but their hope is thrown back in their faces (*cf.* 2. Pet. 3:3). Yet time will justify their eschatology, as *city* and *temple* resound with the uproar of divine requital (6).” II Peter 3:3 reads: “First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.”

### 3. Impossible for people, possible for God vv. 7–9

On the next section Motyer explains: “Eschatology is one of the major points at which those who accept the Bible’s testimony are still subject to scorn. It was widely the same in Isaiah’s day, and consequently he moves from affirming eschatological certainty (6) to affirm that what seems impossible to the human mind is yet God’s simplicity. Can there be birth without labor, children without pain (7), a country and nation born instantaneously (8a-d)? But it will be so (8ef, 9)! Everything comes down to what the Lord is (9). First, he is faithful to the end: he does not advance his purposes (*bring to the moment of birth*) only to abandon them; secondly, he is sovereign: what he initiates he completes – (lit.) ‘Do I beget and (then) close (the womb) ‘? , start what I do not intend to finish?’”

The topic of the birth of a son in a way that bypasses the laws of nature has given rise to a variety of interpretations. The question being “who is this son” and “what does he represent.” *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary*, in a separate note gives a statement by a talmudic teacher that serves to explain the symbolic use of language of Isaiah, saying: “ ‘There was once a woman, who was delivered of 600,000 children in one day,’ viz., Jochebed, who, when she gave birth to Moses, brought 600,000 to the light of freedom (Ex 12:37).” *The Commentary* continues: “Zion, the mother, is no other than the woman of the sun in Rev 12; but the child born of her there is the shepherd of the nations, who proceeds from her at the end of the days, whereas here it is the new Israel of the last days; for the church, which is saved through all her tribulations,

1. II Cor. 4:17

2. Amos 1:2

is both the mother of the Lord, by whom Babel is overthrown, and the mother of that Israel which inherits the promises, that the unbelieving mass have failed to obtain.”

The Hebrew word *zakar* actually means: “remembered,” but in almost every case in which it is used in Scripture it is translated “a male” either of man or animals. This is the only place in Isaiah where that word is used.

The reference to Revelation 12 seems to shed some light on these verses. We read: “A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.”<sup>1</sup> But there are too many differences between John’s vision and Isaiah’s to make one explain the other. The woman in Revelation does not give birth without pain, and it is not obvious beyond discussion whether the child that is born is the Messiah or the church. It is not even clear who the woman is.

Paul’s use of Jerusalem as an image of a spiritual reality may shed some light on the subject. Speaking about the birth of Ishmael and Isaac, the Apostle writes: “These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.”<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah’s words can also be taken as a belated answer to King Hezekiah’s request. When Rabshakeh, the commander of the Assyrian army came to Jerusalem with the threat to attack the city, Hezekiah sent this message to Isaiah: “This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver them. It may be that the LORD your God will hear the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the LORD your God has heard. Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives.”<sup>3</sup> This serves as an illustration of the use of symbolic language that is uncommon in our Western world but widespread in Eastern cultures. The birth without labor pains describes the way God sends deliverance to His children in answer to prayer.

It is obvious that the birth of a child is used allegorically to illustrate a truth that comes about in a way that is unexpected and contrary to the laws of nature, as we know them. Nothing like this has ever happened before. A child is not born without labor pains; a group of persons does not become a nation overnight. Jesus uses the image of childbirth, although not without labor pain, in connection with His death and resurrection. On the eve of His crucifixion, He said to His disciples: “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me”? I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”<sup>4</sup>

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1. Rev. 12:1-6
  2. Gal. 4:24-26
  3. Isa. 37:3,4
  4. John 16:19-22

“Can a country be born in a day?” may have made the Israelites of Isaiah’s day think back upon the conquest of the Promised Land. Israel entered into, what God called, “My rest,” by way of conquering the nations who lived in Palestine. The process took centuries and was never completely finished. The idea of entering into “God’s rest” in one day would have been inconceivable to them. But in Jesus’ victory over death, this is what happened to us. If the sufferings of Christ can be compared to the pain of a woman in labor and the birth of the child to His resurrection from the dead, our conversion and regeneration by the Holy Spirit is a painless birth in our experience. He suffered all the pain of that process in His own body in our behalf.

The birth of a people did happen in one night when Israel celebrated the Passover in Egypt and was driven out of the land of slavery. They received their identity as God’s redeemed overnight, without any of the suffering the Egyptians experienced in the process.

In Isaiah’s prophecy, the one who experiences resurrection from the dead is Jerusalem, the place of God’s revelation on earth. The city’s physical experience of being destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar foreshadowed the death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross of Golgotha. The rebuilding of the city and the restoration of the place of worship took years and was also never fully accomplished. It certainly took more than one day. But the reality it projected, the birth of the church in the coming of the Holy Spirit, was an event that took place in one day. And the coming of the New Jerusalem, the city of God is a painless and instantaneous event.

#### **4. Joy and provision vv.10–11**

Isaiah uses the concept of the rebuilding of the city to convey the truth of God’s provision for eternal life to explain what God will do when He leads us to glory and he does this in a language that the people of his time could understand.

The city becomes our mother and we are the children that she feeds on her breast. The Sons of Korah sang about her in one of their Psalms: “He has set his foundation on the holy mountain; the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are said of you, O city of God: Selah ‘I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me — Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush — and will say, ‘This one was born in Zion.’ Indeed, of Zion it will be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.’ The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: ‘This one was born in Zion.’ ”<sup>1</sup> And again, the Apostle Paul said: “The Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.”<sup>2</sup>

#### **5. The world city of peace vv. 12–13**

The hymn “Like a river glorious is God’s perfect peace” is obviously taken from Isaiah’s words here. Jesus promises peace to those who come to Him and lay their burdens at His feet. We read: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus’ words explain that peace is not cessation of activity but an exchange of the yoke we wear for the one He gives. He also indicates that the heaviness of the yoke we wear is determined by the condition of our heart. Gentleness of humility of heart will make every yoke light. The exchange of yokes, therefore, is in reality a change of heart brought about by the forgiveness of our sins and the regeneration of the Holy Spirit.

The image of the river perfectly fits the spiritual reality. A river is not static; it is a mighty current that flows to the ocean where it finds its fulfillment. The image also shows what evangelism is supposed to look like. When the church’s peace is like a river, those who lack peace will become a river streaming toward the place where it is found. This does not speak against evangelistic outreach, but it shows that if the peace of the Gospel is not modeled in the heart of the church, people who do not know the Lord will not be

1. Ps. 87:1-6

2. Gal. 4:26

3. Matt. 11:28-30

drawn to Him either. The thrust of Jesus' evangelism while He walked the earth was to kindle the fire in the heart of the children in Israel, so that the Gentiles and Samaritans would be drawn to the Gospel. In sending out His disciples, He said: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons."<sup>1</sup> In a way John the Baptist modeled what an evangelist should be like. He did not go to the people, but the people came to him when they realized that he was a real person who had what they lacked in their lives.

As the temple was being rebuilt after the captivity, the Lord gave the same kind of promise to the builders: "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty."<sup>2</sup> Part of the glory of the New Jerusalem will be that the hunger and thirst of all of mankind is being satisfied within her.

V.12 is actually addressed to the world population. God says to mankind that Jerusalem will be our mother who will become the comfort and provider of peace to all. Jerusalem will breastfeed and comfort this world as a mother holds her baby. The picture is one of the fulfillments of man's most elementary needs: physical, emotional and spiritual.

In v.13, the Hebrew reads literally: "As one whom his mother comforts ..." The Hebrew word used for "one" is *'yish*, which refers to "man as an individual or a male person." The first time the word *'yish* is used is in the verse: "The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of *man*.'"<sup>3</sup> Evidently, the image of a mother and her baby is no longer used here; it has become a relationship between adults in which the grownup man receives from his mother the comfort and assurance he needs. *The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* renders the phrase: "Like a man whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you, and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem." The commentary adds: "The prophet now looks upon the members of the church as having grown up, as it were, from childhood to maturity: they suck like a child, and are comforted like a grown-up son ... looking upon the people, whom he had previously thought of as children, as standing before him as one man. Israel is now like a man who has escaped from bondage and returned home from a foreign land, full of mournful recollections, the echoing sounds of which entirely disappear in the maternal arms of divine love there in Jerusalem, the beloved home, which was the home of its thoughts even in the strange land." The beauty of Isaiah's choice of words is overwhelming.

#### 6. Settlement v.14

The joy of the redeemed is compared to the freshness of green grass. The Hebrew word used here is *deshe'*, which is not the same as the grass in the verse: "As for man, his days are like *grass*, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone."<sup>4</sup> The word used there is *chatsiyar*. *Deshe'* is used in the verse: "He makes me lie down in *green* pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters."<sup>5</sup> The herb may be the same but the applications are worlds apart; the one depicts life, the other death.

The joy will be kindled by seeing the hand of God as an act of God, not in the sense in which insurance companies use the expression to describe disasters that are not manmade, but in the sense of recognizing the greatness of God's work of salvation. The joy experienced is the result of a demonstration of God's justice and righteousness. Judgment will be meted out, first of all, to the author of all injustice. Jesus

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1. Matt. 10:5-7
  2. Hag. 2:6-9
  3. Gen. 2:23
  4. Ps. 103:15,16
  5. Ps. 23:2

shows us that this judgment was carried out when He died on the cross. He said: “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”<sup>1</sup> And later He said to His disciples that the Holy Spirit would apply this judgment after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. We read: “When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.”<sup>2</sup>

### **7. The holy and jealous God vv. 15–17**

Ezekiel received the clearest vision of God’s chariots of fire. We read in the opening verses of his book: “I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north — an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, but each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings, and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.”<sup>3</sup> God’s chariots are not the kind of dead vehicles we know, but living beings that serve Him to transport His revelation to wherever He wants to reveal Himself.

The fire Ezekiel saw was God’s holiness; in Isaiah’s prophecy it is the essence of judgment. God’s glory is the measure by which all human behavior will be tested. Paul’s definition of sin is: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”<sup>4</sup> The fire of God’s holiness will put every living being to the test. For some it will mean being consumed, for others who have put their faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ, what the Apostle Paul says in the context of church building, will be applied to their human endeavor: “[their] work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work.”<sup>5</sup>

J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, comments here: “The main components of this terrifying theophany are *fire* (15ad, 16a), *whirlwind* (15b) and *sword* (16a). The leading motif, *fire*, represents, as always the active holiness of God, roused against sin. The *whirlwind* is his sweeping, irresistible wind of judgment that leaves nothing behind – linked here with *chariots* to depict pursuit as of mobile warfare, leaving no escape. The *sword* is the application of judgment individually. In Scripture, the whole sweep of human history lies between this fire and this sword of holiness (Gn. 3:24; Is. 27:1). Thus the Lord *will execute judgment*, ‘exert his judicial right.’ *Judgment* is the enforcement of total righteousness – the righteousness which the Lord donned as a robe in 59:17 and then bequeathed to his Anointed (61:10), who himself returned from the winepress of wrath ‘speaking in righteousness.’ Every act of God is pure righteousness, and it will be so when he turns at the end to deal with all men (lit. ‘all flesh’).”

The consecration in v.17 is a dedication to evil, that is to idol worship. There are some problems with this verse that make it difficult to determine its exact meaning. *The New International Version* uses the words “following the one in the midst.” *The King James Version* reads: “behind one tree in the midst.” *The New Kings James Version*: “After an idol in the midst.” *Barnes’ Notes* observes: “This passage has not a little exercised the ingenuity of commentators. It is quite evident that our translators were not able to satisfy themselves with regard to its meaning. In the margin they have rendered it, ‘one after another,’ supposing that it may mean that the idolaters engaged in their sacrifices in a solemn procession, walking one after another around their groves, their shrines, or their altars. In the translation in the text, they seem to have

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1. John 12:31,33
  2. John 16:8-11
  3. Ezek. 1:4-9
  4. Rom. 3:23
  5. I Cor. 3:13,14

supposed that the religious rites referred to were celebrated behind one particular selected tree in the garden. Lowth renders it, 'After the rites of Achad.' Jerome renders it, ... 'In the gardens they sanctify themselves behind the gate within.' The Septuagint, 'Who consecrate and purify themselves ... for the gardens, and they who, in the outer courts, eat swine's flesh,' etc. The Chaldee renders the phrase ... 'Multitude after multitude.' The vexed Hebrew phrase used here, *`achar`achad*, it is very difficult to explain. The word *`achar* means properly after; the after part; the extremity; behind-in the sense of following after, or going after anyone. The word *`achad*, means properly one; someone; anyone."

#### **8. The new house at the center of the new creation vv. 18–24**

In spite of the linguistic confusion, it is obvious that the verse deals with the practice of idolatry, which gives God reason to intervene. We understand that it was Israel's idolatry that would make them lose the inheritance which God had intended them to have. The main purpose of Israel's election had been that they would be out of all nations God's treasured possession and a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.<sup>1</sup> God had chosen them to be the guardians of His revelation on earth. For that reason they were commanded to exterminate idolatry and all who practiced it from the land of Canaan. Instead of doing this they left enough pockets of idolatry to become infected with it themselves and God evicted them from the Promised Land. Although idolatry disappeared from among Israel after their return from captivity, history would repeat itself in Israel's in the rejection of her Messiah. God once more took the kingdom away from them and gave the keys to those who accepted the Gospel. That is the point Jesus made in His "Parable of the vineyard."<sup>2</sup> What Isaiah is predicting here about God's gathering of all nations and tongues to see His glory is contained in Jesus' announcement: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."<sup>3</sup>

We see again with amazement how God takes a potentially disastrous situation and turns it around, using it as a vehicle of His glory, proving the truth of Paul's statement: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."<sup>4</sup>

God gives a sign, a beacon, a proof of the reality of the message, some of which may be miraculous. The Hebrew word *owth* could mean either or all of that. We find the word used in the promise God gave to Noah after the flood: 'I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be *the sign* of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.'<sup>5</sup> In the context of Isaiah's text, the sign must be seen as the sign of the cross. That is the banner that leads the army of heaven in the proclamation of the Gospel to those who have not yet heard. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, concurs with this thought, saying: "The Lord will gather the nations, not by a banner lifted afar (1:12–13; 49:22; 62:10) but by *a sign among them*, around which they rally. Isaiah does not say what the *sign* is, but since in its biblical context this passage lies in the interim between the two comings of Jesus, the *sign* can only be the cross. *I will send* is the Old Testament's expression of the New Testament missionary mandate. Broadly, 2:2–4 summarizes the Old Testament ideal: a community of the word of God, magnetic to the surrounding world; Matthew 28:19–20 summarizes the New Testament ideal: an outreaching church. Each is equally important in the total biblical view, but here the Lord sends (as once he sent Isaiah) *those who survive*, 'the escapees.' In context, these are the people whom the judgment of God (16) does not touch, those for whom the work of God is not vengeance but salvation, who have heard the cry of 'Peace, 'peace' and exercised the gift of penitence (57:19). Some of these are now his missionaries worldwide, as the impressionistically chosen place names are intended to

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1. See Ex. 19:5,6.

2. See Matt. 21:33-41.

3. Matt. 24:14

4. Rom. 8:28

5. Gen. 9:13-15

suggest. *Tarshish*; see 2:26; 23:1; 60:9, *Libyans ... Lydians* (lit. Pul and Lud, mentioned along with Cush in Jeremiah 46:9 and Ezekiel 30:5. The link with Cush is thought by some to suggest a southern location, but most agree with NIV. *Tubal* was in the far north (Ezk. 39:1) and *Greece* is Javan.”

The emphasis of the missionary message in v.19 is not on the lostness of man but on the glory of God. This less than subtle difference is not often clearly understood. The revelation of God’s glory often results in conviction of sin, since sin means falling short of the glory of God. That in turn may lead to repentance and salvation, which is not the essence but the byproduct of the message. Our stress of salvation is, of course, not wrong, because man is lost in sin. But when the emphasis on salvation overshadows the prominence of God’s glory, something is wrong in our philosophy of missions.

Isaiah seems to give a telescopic vision of the preaching of the Gospel to the nations of the world and the return of Israel to the Lord, as if the two events are closely connected. As far as the physical return of Jews to the Promised Land is concerned, most of that has already occurred. And since the Gospel still has not reached every nation, tribe, people and language the two do not seem too closely connected, at least in the physical sense of the word. It makes more sense to look for a spiritual link between the conversion of the Gentiles and the return of Israel, not primarily to the land but to the Lord. As the Apostle Paul states: “Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.”<sup>1</sup>

The Lord will consider the return of Israel to Himself as the bringing of a sacrifice, a living sacrifice. As a result of this mass sacrifice of human beings some will be called into fulltime service. All this is set in the language of the temple rituals, which made it easy for Israel to understand.

We cannot really separate the physical from the spiritual. When we surrender ourselves completely to the Lord we give Him our spirit, soul and body. Paul expressed this kind of worship so beautifully in the exhortation: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.”<sup>2</sup>

In the last two verses of his book, Isaiah looks beyond the horizon of life on earth into eternity. This is what the Apostle John saw and described in Revelation: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’ He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’”<sup>3</sup>

Yet, Isaiah continues to speak in terms of time and space on earth, speaking about New Moons and Sabbath, concepts related to the time frame in which we live. We understand, however, that eternity is not an endless continuation of weeks and months; but how else can we describe that for which we have no words?

The mention of the cemetery, probably, falls in the same category. Outside the old city of Jerusalem was the valley of Hinnom, called Gehenna where the city’s garbage was dumped and burned. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* explains: “That ‘the valley of Hinnom’ became the technical designation for the place of final punishment was due to two causes. In the first place the valley had been the seat of the idolatrous worship of Molech, to whom children were immolated by fire (2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6). Secondly, on account of these practices the place was defiled by King Josiah (2 Kings 23:10), and became in consequence associated in prophecy with the judgment to be visited upon the people (Jer 7:32). The fact,

1. Rom. 11:25,26
2. Rom. 12:1,2
3. Rev. 21:1-5

also, that the city's offal was collected there may have helped to render the name synonymous with extreme defilement." Jesus referred to this garbage dump as an illustration of the place of eternal punishment of those who persist in their rebellion against God. We read: "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' Everyone will be salted with fire."<sup>1</sup>

Our problem is to reconcile the experience of eternal bliss in the presence of God with the reminder of such monuments of sin, corruption and rebellion. J. Alec Motyer, in *Isaiah*, observes: "Remarkably there is a cemetery by the city, and when 'all flesh' comes to worship they make a point *to go out and look* at the fate from which they have been rescued. They enjoy the day the fate from which they have been rescued. They enjoy the day of salvation, but they do not allow themselves to forget the day of vengeance. These are *dead* because the judgment of God is for real: they are those 'slain by the LORD' (16). The accusation leveled and made out against them is that they *rebelled*: they knew the word of the Lord but deliberately and willfully went their own way (4). Consequently, the worm in the bud – the heart of rebellion, the corrupt, fallen nature – was the winner, and it is their endless lot to live the life of corruption (*their worm will not die*) under the endless antagonism of divine holiness, *i.e.* the unquenched fire. On the lips of Jesus, these words are used to express the burning 'life' Gehenna (Mk. 9:43-48), and ultimately they become the reality of the second death, a final change of place and state with continuity of person (Rev. 20:15). The purpose of visiting the cemetery is not to gloat (it is too awful for that), nor even to pity (though who could restrain pity?), but rather to register again something *loathsome (dera'own, cf. Dn. 12:2)*, to be repelled and revolted; that is to say, to see again the wages of sin and the fruit of rebellion, and thereby to be newly motivated to obedience and love of the word of God. There is also another thought which we noted in verse 14; it is part of the saints' sense of the reality of their security to be assured that the Lord had dealt, finally and fully, with everything that could ever threaten or blight their eternal joy."

The best way to approach the meaning of a section like this may be to compare it to a visit to a holocaust museum. People who have visited former Nazi concentration camps, such as Dachau or Auschwitz, have received the deepest shock to their moral conscience and a clearer understanding of what the fallen human heart is able to do. They come away with the understanding that things like these must never be allowed to happen again.

The question that haunts us is that such museums would really be part of God's new heaven and earth. Another problem is that Isaiah's cemetery seems to conflict with descriptions of hell as we find them elsewhere in Scripture. Dead bodies in cemeteries do not suffer pain; their decomposition is supposed to be painless. The rich man in Jesus' story was conscious of his pain. We read: "In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'<sup>2</sup>

*The Keil and Delitzsch Commentary* observes here: "The new Jerusalem of our prophet has indeed a new heaven above it and a new earth under it, but it is only the old Jerusalem of earth lifted up to its highest glory and happiness; whereas the new Jerusalem of the Apocalypse comes down from heaven, and is therefore of heavenly nature. In the former dwells the Israel that has been brought back from captivity; in the latter, the risen church of those who are written in the book of life. And whilst our prophet transfers the place in which the rebellious are judged to the neighborhood of Jerusalem itself; in the Apocalypse, the lake of fire in which the life of the ungodly is consumed, and the abode of God with men, are for ever separated. The

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1. Mark 9:43-49

2. Luke 16:23,24

Hinnom-valley outside Jerusalem has become Gehenna, and this is no longer within the precincts of the new Jerusalem, because there is no need of any such example to the righteous who are for ever perfect.”

The Jews had and still have a problem with the ending of Isaiah’s prophecy. The same commentary states: “In the lessons prepared for the synagogue v. 23 is repeated after v. 24, on account of the terrible character of the latter, ‘so as to close with words of consolation.’ ”

Finally, *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Here is more imagery, which it is impossible to understand literally. The carcasses could not remain always to be looked at, nor while they remained could the sight of them be otherwise than loathsome to God’s redeemed saints. Again, they could not be at the same time burnt with fire and eaten by worms. ‘The prophet, by the very mode of description adopted by him, precludes the possibility of our conceiving of the things set forth are realized in any material form in this present state. He is speaking of the future state, but in *figures* drawn from the present world’ (Delitzsch). Does he mean more than this – that the redeemed shall have in their thoughts, at any rate from time to time, the fact that, while they have by God’s great mercy been saved and brought into His kingdom, there are those who have not been saved, but lie for ever under the awful sentence of God’s wrath? This is a knowledge which the redeemed must have, and which may well produce a salutary effect on them.”

On the phrase “their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched,” the same commentary concludes: “It cannot be by chance that the evangelical prophet concludes his glorious prophecy with this terrible note of warning. Either he was divinely directed thus to terminate his teaching, or he felt the need that there was of his emphasizing all the many warnings dispersed throughout his ‘book’ by a final, never-to-be-forgotten picture. The undying worm and the quenchless fire – images introduced by him – became appropriated thenceforth to the final condition of impenitent sinners (Jud. 16:17; Ecclus. 7:17), and were even adopted by our Lord himself in the same connection (Mark 9.). The incongruity of the two images shows that they are not to be understood literally; but both alike imply everlasting continuance, and are incompatible with either of the two modern heresies of universalism and annihilationism.”

It has been said that Jesus mentioned hell more often than heaven during His teaching on earth. The reason was, obviously, not preeminence but warning. We may look at Isaiah’s disturbing ending of his beautiful and superb book of prophecy in the same way. God “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”<sup>1</sup> He offers us the truth in Jesus Christ as He offered the tree of life to Adam and Eve, adding the warning “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”<sup>2</sup> We all died once in Adam; God does not want us to die again without Christ.

Toccoa Falls, GA, 11/11/07

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1. I Tim. 2:4  
2. Gen. 2:16,17