

ISAIAH

A SHORT SERIES

by Ray C. Stedman

13 messages delivered to the congregation of Peninsula Bible Church South (PBCC), Cupertino, California.
Reformatting and error-correction by Ben Whitney, February 22, 1997.

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THE HUMAN PROBLEM

by Ray C. Stedman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Some would ask, why bother with this ancient history about a people who lived thousands of years ago, a history that cannot possibly have any bearing upon us today? To that, the Apostle Paul in the New Testament says that "all these things happened to Israel as types (or portraits) for our edification," {cf, 1 Cor 10:11}. In the Old Testament we see ourselves portrayed. The problems it pictures are the same problems we face today.

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

**Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for the Lord has spoken:
"Sons have I reared and brought up,
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner,
and the ass its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people does not understand." {Isa 1:2-3 RSV}**

This summons by God to heaven and earth to listen to what he has to say indicates this is universal truth; it applies at all times and in all places. The problem is that the children whom he lovingly took care of, and to whom he gave tremendous opportunities, turned their backs on him in rebellion and walked in their own ways. That is one of the commonest problems of today, isn't it? God also pinpoints the most painful thing about the blindness of these rebellious children, that is, their ingratitude. Even animals, he says, know better. The ox knows his owner and the ass his master's crib. Animals are grateful for their loving care, but not the children of men.

That highlights one of the problems this book of Isaiah confronts: Why is it that mankind is so blind to the goodness and mercy of God?

In Idaho a few weeks ago, David Roper told me how an 80-year-old man responded when told of his need for a relationship with God. The old man squared his shoulders and said, "I've lived for 80 years without God. I don't think I need him now." What an incredible statement! It is amazing that anyone can breathe God's air, which man did not invent or produce, eat food that comes from a process that God, not man, set into being, enjoy beauty which no man has made, live by means of the sunshine and the provisions of life which come from natural sources, which man has had nothing to do with, and still declare that he has lived for 80 years without God!

Every breath we breathe is by the mercy of God. Everything comes from his providing hand. But man ignores and turns his back upon all that, and then goes about saying that only man matters. That is incredible blindness. But that is the problem that Isaiah faces here.

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

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

Let us take a closer look at those seven things:

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

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

We are proud of the technological advances of our day. A man who works in Silicon Valley told me that if the automobile had kept pace with the development of the microchip, we ought to be able to buy a Rolls Royce for \$2.50 and get 1,000 miles to the gallon, towing the Queen Mary! But what of the people who invent these things? They are laden with the same burdens that Israel faced in the days of Isaiah. We still have not learned how to keep a delinquent child from corrupting a whole neighborhood. We still have not learned how to save a disintegrating marriage by having those involved take an honest look at themselves and begin to work in harmony -- not in estrangement. Our inability to do these things is what God is analyzing here.

These people are also the "offspring of evildoers," he says, "sons of evildoers." This is an inherited problem, passed along from generation to generation.

They are "sons of corruption," passing along their evil tendencies to the next generation as well.

More than that, "they have forsaken Jehovah." There is a strange conspiracy, prevalent in politics and education, to keep God out on the fringes of life, to never mention his name or acknowledge his presence. Any effort to insert him into public affairs meets with tremendous resistance. People have turned their backs on the living God, and do not like to acknowledge that he has any part in human affairs.

Further, God declares, "they have despised the Holy One of Israel." They have blasphemed the God of Glory, they have insulted his majesty. That too is evident on every side today.

The ultimate result is, "they are utterly estranged." They are alienated, we would say. People are alienated from God and from each other. History confirms that when you lose God, you lose man as well. You can only understand man when you understand God, for man is made in the image of God. To lose the image of God is to lose the image of man. This is the problem with the world of our day.

Isaiah goes on to use a vivid figure to describe the consequences of this.

**Why will you still be smitten,
that you continue to rebel?
The whole head is sick,**

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

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

The prophet goes on to describe the consequences of this seven-fold indictment of the people of Israel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of he-goats." {Isa 1:10-11 RSV}**

God is no pagan deity whose anger is mollified by bloody sacrifices. No, those are symbols, he says, and he has had enough of symbols which are empty.

**"Bring no more vain offerings;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies --
I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly.
Your new moons and your appointed feasts
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them.
When you spread forth your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;" {Isa 1:13-15a RSV}**

What good are empty religious exercises that do not involve the heart, where there is no change in the life? These are merely play-acting and charade, designed to keep God happy so he will not destroy your plans or cancel your prerogatives. What a low view of God, to think that he can be paid off by religious performance!

All of these things mentioned here, of course, were legitimate, even God-given, forms of expressing truth about man and God. But God is saying, "If your heart is not in it, if you do not mean what you sing, and what you say, it is nauseating to me."

What does God want, then? If religious ritual and beautiful, well-planned services don't do it, what will satisfy him? He tells Judah and us in very plain language, Verse 16:

**"Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
defend the fatherless,
plead for the widow." {Isa 1:16-17 RSV}**

Here are two steps, one negative, one positive: stop doing wrong; start doing right. This is what God wants. The sign of true faith is obedience and service. If these are not present, then the expressions of faith that you are offering are nauseating in his sight.

Here is a quote from an insert in our bulletin that is pertinent to what I am saying.

Our children may be cheated out of a vital Christian life if their models are Christian adults who continually place a priority on getting and keeping more and more things and experiences. The only alternative to the threat of materialism in our children's lives is the adult model of "gaining your life by losing it." This is the biblical model kids must see from us in order to grow up spiritually healthy. So, while we are pondering over Christmas lists and checkbooks, let us also consider practical ways we can live intentionally Christian lives before our children.

That is what God wants.

I clipped this paragraph from a Christian magazine the other day.

We pick up our newspaper and read about a three-year-old boy who is whipped with a belt for three hours because he wet his pants. We read about his cries and pleadings as his little body squirms under the foot of his stepfather. We read about this beating, which is his last in a year long series of frequent beatings; his last because he died in his bed a half hour later. We read about how the boy's body is found months later, buried in a creek, with a tiny cross clutched in his hands. We read about this brutal murder of a defenseless child, and we feel sick. Then we turn to the financial section and read about how the economy is improving. We turn to the entertainment section and look for an interesting movie to go to. We turn to the sports section and read about last night's game. Soon the sickness leaves us. We forget about the little boy, and forget that indifference makes us accomplices.

One of those things that troubles me most about the Christian world of our day is the fact that so many churches are unconcerned about pressing needs around them, and do so little to help. Yesterday I was pleased to visit a luncheon at PBC North, an annual Christmas affair put on by our Ambassadors class. They go to all the nursing homes and sanitariums around our area, picking up many of the residents to take them there, and serve them a wonderful Christmas lunch. They reach out to these older men and women who seldom get out, some of whom are in wheelchairs, some incontinent, some with unpleasant smells. I was especially pleased because no pastor has ever suggested that the Ambassadors take on that service of love. That is the outcry of changed hearts, the outreaching of changed lives.

But when we read these verses, there is a problem immediately evident. God's analysis of the human race is that we are tainted with self-centeredness so that we do not want to do good, basically. We want to minister to our own needs and our own lives. But when we hear his command, "Wash yourself, stop sinning, look out for others," the question arises, how can evil people do good things?

This cry is answered in the next three verses. This is the theme of the book of Isaiah. "Come now," God says, "let us reason together." (This was President Lyndon Johnson's favorite Bible verse.)

**"Come now, let us reason together,
says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they be red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
But if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." {Isa 1:18-20 RSV}**

It could not be put any plainer. There is no help in man himself. We cannot heal ourselves. We need more than our habits changed. We ourselves need to be changed, and that change can only occur in a relationship with the living God.

This is the *good news*, this is the *gospel*. It looks forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus, and the shedding of his blood, his taking our place that God might put our sins upon him, and, thus, enable him to give us the gift of righteousness so that our hearts will be changed. Selfishness is not taken away but it is overcome by the gift of love.

We used to sing in Sunday School an old hymn.

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
O precious is the flow
That washes white as snow.
No other fount I know.
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

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

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

That is the message of Isaiah.

There may be some here this morning who have been attempting to clean up their own lives. Every Christmas time people get the urge to stop doing things that obviously are hurting themselves and others. Yet it never seems to work. They may stop temporarily, but then another bad habit surfaces and soon they return to their old ways. There is no power to change. But the gospel, the beautiful good news, is that God has found a way to break through the human problem to give us a changed heart and teach us a new way of living.

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

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this wonderfully forthright and honest word; and for the good news that we are not left in our doleful, miserable condition, but that you have broken through into our lives by means of the Lord Jesus, by his death and resurrection, and are offering to make us different. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new," {cf, 2 Cor 5:17}. Thank you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Title: The Human Problem
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 1
Message No: 1
Catalog No: 576
Date: December 8, 1985

HIS MAJESTY

by Ray C. Stedman

We are studying highlights from the great prophecy of Isaiah "Isaiah's greatest hits," as someone has described them. One of the greatest is the well known sixth chapter, where the prophet is given a vision of the glory of God.

Some commentators feel that this event is what introduced Isaiah to his prophetic ministry. From the placement of the chapter, however, it is clear that it follows ministry which he has already had. In Chapter 1 we looked at his first message to the people of Judah. He had prophesied for some years of ministry during the reign of King Uzziah who is also called Azariah in the Book of Chronicles. Uzziah began his reign at age 16, and for 52 years ruled Judah. For the most part he was a good and righteous king. The record shows that he followed in the footsteps of his ancestor King David. But the Book of Chronicles tells us that when Uzziah "grew strong, he became proud, to his own destruction." He presumed to enter the office of priesthood. He went into the temple, taking incense from the altar of incense which he sought to offer before the Lord. Immediately he

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But these words also express the holiness of God. I confess for years I never liked the word "holy." The people I knew who were considered holy were grim-looking individuals who looked like they had been soaked in embalming fluid. They never seemed to have any fun or joy in life. But I have learned since that the word "holy" is a very wonderful word. It comes from a related English root, the word "whole." We all want to be whole, complete, with nothing out of order or unbalanced about us. That is how God is. He is perfect, total, lacking nothing. He is exactly what he ought to be. That is what the angels are singing. We admire people who approach in any degree this idea of wholeness or completeness, although we know how broken and fragmented is all mankind. But God, in his perfection, is absolutely whole "holy."

Further, the seraphim declare that God's glory is manifest everywhere: "the whole earth is full of his glory." It has always struck me as strange that in this universe of order and procedure men so often fail to apprehend the glory of God. The universe is incredibly vast. Astronomers tell us that even our own galaxy, our own little neighborhood, is three hundred thousand light years across. Light traveling at eleven million miles per minute takes three hundred thousand years to traverse it! And there are millions and even billions of galaxies like ours, and larger than ours, flung throughout the vast cosmos.

But when we turn to the minutest forms of matter, the atom, with its tiny electrons, neutrons and protons, we see a miniature universe, just as wondrous, with distances on a relative scale as vast as the cosmos itself. Think of the beauty and the order of the world of nature, of our own being, with our amazing capacities that far surpass those of the animal world. If only we had eyes to see we would know what the seraphim declare, "the whole earth is full of his glory." This is what led Elizabeth Barrett Browning to write,

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush aflame with God.
But only those who see take off their shoes.
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

Isaiah is given a vision of God, wondrous in his glory, shining above the brightness of the sun, amazing in his character, praised by the high'est of the angels, awesome in majesty.

Further, the prophet sees the effectiveness of the God who sits enthroned:

The foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. {Isa 6:4 RSV}

The full meaning of this breaks upon us when we turn to the 12th chapter of the gospel of John, where the apostle quotes from the latter part of this chapter of Isaiah. Speaking of Jesus, John says these amazing words: "Isaiah said this because he saw his (Jesus') glory and spoke of him" (John 12:41). This One whom Isaiah saw, by the words of an inspired apostle, is identified as none other than the Lord Jesus, the very One who, following his resurrection, declared, "All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me," {cf, Matt 28:11}.

But this vision of the majesty of Jesus reveals to Isaiah what we can only call, the malady of man.

And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the

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

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

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

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

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

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

A marvelous lesson that runs all through Scripture is that nothing hinders our being used by God more than pride and self-sufficiency. When Isaiah saw the majesty, the glory and the effectiveness of God, there came burning in his heart a desire to be used of God, to have a part in God's glorious work. Who does not want to have part in a highly successful enterprise? The great hunger of the human heart is the desire to be used of God. Even those who have given themselves to abusing themselves and others have within themselves a strong desire to be so used. I have seen presidents of great companies here in the Silicon Valley who trembled at the realization that God was about to use them to change somebody's life. There is no greater hunger than the hunger to be used of God. But when Isaiah became aware of that hunger, he also became aware that he was not fit to be used; he would mess everything up if he tried. This is what draws this cry from his heart.

It is not a pleasant way to feel, but it is a very hopeful place to arrive at, because pride is the source of all human evil. All the agony of life flows from our feeling that we deserve more than we are getting. We desire to be bigger, better or more noted than others. In the Bible, pride is the source of all evil. Humility, on the other hand, is the source of all virtue. The first of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount corresponds to what Isaiah declares of himself as he viewed the majesty of God. "Blessed are the poor in spirit [the bankrupt ones, the ones who have nothing in themselves], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," {Matt 5:3}. God labors constantly in our lives to bring us to this same awareness as Isaiah.

A few months ago a pastor shared with me that he had arrived at the place where he was proud and happy with all that was going on in his church. The church was bursting at the seams and they were engaged in a new building program. He was congratulating himself on the tremendous job he had done in the ministry. When he and his wife went on vacation in another city they went to a church to hear a man preach whom they had always wanted to hear. This man took for his text Peter's word, "Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God, for God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble," {cf, 1 Pet 5:5-6}. He listened critically to the

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

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

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

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

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

How wonderful to see the gospel of forgiveness in the Old Testament as well as in the New. This coal was not taken from the altar of incense (which stood before the door of the Holy of Holies), but from the brazen altar in the courtyard, where the sacrifices were offered. It speaks of the cost of redemption, the cost of forgiveness. It foresees One who had to lay down his life that we might be forgiven. This is the glory of the gospel. William Cowper sings,

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

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

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

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

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

Once again the prophet hears the voice of God.

**And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us ?"
Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." And he said, "Go, and say to this people:
'Hear and hear, but do not understand;
see and see, but do not perceive.'
Make the heart of this people fat,
and their eyes heavy,
and shut their eyes,
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed." {Isa 6:8-10 RSV}**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Go." Something great has happened to you, so *go!*

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

Prayer:

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

Title: His Majesty
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 6
Message No: 2
Catalog No: 577
Date: December 15, 1985

O COME IMMANUEL

by Ray C. Stedman

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

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

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

In Chapter 7 of Isaiah we have the prophetic announcement of that virgin birth. One commentator has written: "Of measureless importance to the universe, to this world, to every individual of the human family is the prophecy to which we have now come. On the fulfillment of this prophecy all Christianity rests, as a building on its foundation."

It is important to point out that perhaps twenty years of time lie between Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 of Isaiah. The sixteen-year reign of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, is passed over in silence. We leap from "the year in which king Uzziah died" at the beginning of Jotham's reign, to the reign of Jotham's son, King Ahaz, a man so sunken in idolatry that he offered his own son to the pagan god of Molech.

The historical setting of the prophecy of the birth of Messiah is given in the opening two verses of Chapter 7:

In the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, son of Uzziah, king of Judah, Rezin the king of Syria and Pekah the son of Remaliah the king of Israel came up to Jerusalem to wage war against it, but they could not conquer it. When the house of David [king Ahaz] was told, "Syria is in league with Ephraim," his heart and the heart of his people shook as

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

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

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

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

Isaiah brings a word of comfort to the king. He tells him he does not have any need to fear as there is no real danger. Notice the almost contemptuous way God refers to these two invading armies and their kings. "Smoldering stumps of firebrands" he calls them. Their fire has gone out; there is nothing but smoke left.

In Verse 5 we discover why:

**"Because Syria, with Ephraim [another name for the northern kingdom] and the son of Remaliah [Pekah, the king of Israel] has devised evil against you, saying, "Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the son of Tabe-el as king in the midst of it," thus says the Lord God:
It shall not stand,
and it shall not come to pass. {Isa 7:5-7 RSV}**

That is clear and unequivocal; the threat will come to nothing. God goes on to give the reason for this powerful, forthright message:

"For the head of Syria is Damascus its capital, and the head of Damascus is Rezin [the king]. {Isa 7:8a RSV}

This king is such a weak figure that he is no threat and therefore Syria and Damascus may be disregarded.

"(Within sixty-five years Ephraim will be broken to pieces so that it will no longer be a people.) And the head of Ephraim is Samaria [that was its capital, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah." {Isa 7:8b-9a RSV}

That is Pekah, the king, who also is an inconsequential figure. Isaiah warns Ahaz:

"If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established." {Isa 7:9b RSV}

That is a play on words in the Hebrew. We could capture it in English if we put it this way: "If there is no belief, you will find no relief."

All this seems very far removed from us. These events happened long, long ago in a country far distant from us. Yet there are several important matters included here that we must not fail to note. Bear with me as I give

you some pointers on how to interpret Old Testament prophecies. Notice first that the prophet is specifically told to take along with him his little son Shear-jashub. Although the boy does nothing and says nothing, his very presence is required to make this prophecy meaningful, as we will see. The boy's name (which means, "A remnant shall return"), is the significant element that the prophet is to bring before the king.

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

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

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

In looking at this passage we must remember the peculiar nature of Isaiah's commission. In Chapter 6 he was sent to this people with a very strange message. God said to him, "Go and speak to this people, but speak in a way that they will 'hear what you say but they will not hear it,' and they will 'see what you are talking about but they will not perceive it.'" Here we are given a clue that Isaiah is to prophesy in rather cryptic, double-meaning language.

This word about the "conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field" is a good example of this. The beauty of the Hebrew language is that it is capable of a number of different meanings. That is not true of Greek. Scholars and students love the Greek New Testament because Greek is a very precise language. But Hebrew is not like that. It paints in big globs of color which can be interpreted in various ways. Many of the Hebrew words actually have many meanings -- sometimes meanings that are even opposites. Granted that this makes interpretation difficult, but it also makes it challenging and very interesting.

Let me show you what I mean. The word "pool" here ("the conduit of the upper pool"), in Hebrew also means "blessing." It is obvious why a pool of water would be called a blessing. In a dry and thirsty land any pool of water would clearly prove to be a blessing. So the word has both meanings. The word "upper" ("the upper pool") means more than a pool located on a higher level. It also means "the most high." So what we have as a

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

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

When these meanings are considered we see why the prophet was sent to where these two places met -- it was where the "upward way of cleansing and of washing, met the downward flow of the channel of the blessings of the Most High." What would that symbolize? From the New Testament, we know it could only describe the Lord Jesus himself. He is the "end of the aqueduct, the channel of the blessing of the Most High." He is also "the way of cleansing," the upward ascent that brought the prophet to this place. It is all a beautiful poetic description of Jesus himself. (Forty years later, by the way, the king of Assyria stood on that very spot and threatened the city of Jerusalem again. God met him by sending an angel into the camp of the Assyrians and slew 185,000 of them in one night.).

Now we learn why the prophet was told to take his son Shear-jashub with him.

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test " And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman, or, as some texts have it, a virgin, shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey that he may know how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, that land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah [he will bring] the king of Assyria." {Isa 7:10-17 RSV}

The rest of the chapter describes the destruction that would follow as a result of that invasion by the king of Assyria.

What a confusing passage this is to many! Jewish commentators say this prophecy of Immanuel is not a reference to Jesus but merely a sign given to King Ahaz, and has only to do with the immediate events that would transpire in that land. It is not a prophecy of a virgin bearing a child, they say (especially the virgin Mary), but it was fulfilled by a young woman of that time, probably the prophet's wife. This confusing language is why many have missed the import of this message.

But notice, first of all, the wide scope from which Ahaz was invited to choose a sign. God said to him, "Ask of me and I will give you a sign (that what I say is going to happen), and you can choose from as deep as Sheol (hell itself) or as high as heaven." In other words, this sign was intended to be of world-shaking importance, something that all the peoples of the earth for all time would know about, a sign that would strengthen the faith of millions.

The petulant king, who had no interest in a sign from God and did not even believe that God could or would do anything for him, tries hypocritically to cover his unbelief by pious words, "Oh, I wouldn't think of asking a sign for such a one as me!" But he has just been invited by God to ask for a sign! Have you ever heard anyone talk like that? I have read passages of Scripture to people listing promises of God about what he would do if they would trust him, and they have responded, "Oh, I cannot believe that God would do anything like

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

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

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

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

That was to be the sign to the House of David, but that was not the sign to Ahaz. Beginning with Verse 15, the prophet goes on to give him that sign. We read, "He (this sounds at first like it refers to Immanuel but later verses show otherwise)... shall eat curds and honey that he may know how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted." That is clearly the sign for Ahaz for it deals directly with the problem he faced. But who, then, is this "he" to whom it refers?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most of our Lord's ministry was spent in Galilee. There he healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, healed the lame, cast out demons and raised the dead. There some of his greatest messages were preached: the Sermon on the Mount, overlooking the Sea of Galilee; the great message on the bread of life in John 6, which was uttered after the feeding of the 5,000; there he told his great parables: the parable of the sower, the parable of the prodigal son, etc. All these wonderful utterances were made in that land of darkness. A "great light" had indeed come among them.

Between Verses 2 and 3 of this chapter we have what has been called "the great parenthesis" in prophecy. It leaps over the centuries, past our own day, to the day when the nation of Israel discovers who their Messiah is. This is a frequent occurrence in the Old Testament. The Apostle Peter in his first letter says the prophets described "the sufferings of Christ and the glory which should follow," {1 Pet 1:11 KJV}. Peter puts these events together, but we know that the sufferings came at his first advent, while the glory will follow at his second advent. All through the Old Testament we see the blending of these two great themes. This is why Jews struggle with believing that Jesus is their Messiah. They read prophecies that link these two events together and saw that when Jesus came he did not do what is described here. Isaiah predicts, in Verse 3,

**Thou hast multiplied the nation,
thou hast increased its joy;
they rejoice before thee
as with joy at the harvest,
as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.
For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
thou has broken as on the day of Midian. {Isa 9:3-4 RSV}**

That is a reference to Gideon and his great victory.

**For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire. {Isa 9:5 RSV}**

That is a beautiful figure depicting worldwide peace, when the implements of warfare will be destroyed. It is what the peace movements of our day are longing to see, and what the bumper stickers cry for, "Make Peace Not War." All that will happen -- but in that day.

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

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

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

What a remarkable picture! It hardly needs any exposition.

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

The four titles Isaiah lists represent that:

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

"Mighty God." That unquestionably divine title can only describe God. He is the Mighty One, and in 10:21 the same term is used of God unmistakably.

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

No one contests the last title, "Prince of Peace." He states himself, "My peace I give unto you," {John 14:27 KJV}. "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end." This phrase captures the universal character of the Messiah's reign and its extension at last to the whole created cosmos.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Title: O Come Immanuel

By: Ray C. Stedman

Series: Isaiah: A Short Series

Scripture: Isaiah 7, 9

Message No: 3

Catalog No: 578

Date: December 22, 1985

WHAT'S COMING DOWN?

by Ray C. Stedman

We are nearing the end of what has been a very difficult year, one of the most troubled of this century. The worst airline accidents in history have occurred during the past year. Terrorism has been rampant during 1985. Just last week we were sobered by the terrible slaughter of innocent people, including children, in the airports at Rome and Vienna. Violence is increasing, and the forces of law and order seem more and more helpless to control it. All this makes us wonder what is coming down as the century draws to a close. Many, especially those of us who are parents and grandparents, wonder what kind of world our children and grandchildren will inherit. Is it going to go on forever like this, growing worse and worse as time goes by?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

wanted him he was captivated by what he saw.

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

The second pair, "the spirit of counsel and of might," speak of authority. Counsel is the ability to give good and right advice, while might is the ability to help carry it out. This is described even more fully in the words in verse three, "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." What a wonderful description of Jesus as he met with people. He does not judge Nicodemus, one of the greatest of religious authorities in the nation, by his outward words or posture. He sees immediately that this man knows virtually nothing about the spiritual life, so he begins with the ABC's and speaks of the vital things that introduce one to the kingdom of God. He spoke of truth that you can never find out by human powers. He described how the angels live, what happens after death, how prayer works, how the devil works. These he described with full authority. He did not have to study reference books, but rather spoke so that men hearing him said, "No man ever spake like this man," {John 7:46 KJV}. Yes, upon him rested "the spirit of counsel and of might."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John continues,

His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood [which speaks of his death], and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. {Rev 19:12-13 RSV}

From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron [The very phrase taken from Isaiah's prophecy]; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords. {Rev 1:15-16 RSV}

Both Isaiah and John reveal that Jesus is the hope of this world. He is the Man that men cannot forget.

This week I saw an advertisement for a newly published book, "Jesus Through the Centuries." The writer says, "Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of western culture for almost twenty centuries. It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars. It is by his name that millions curse, and in his name that millions pray."

The world cannot forget Jesus because he is the Lord of this world. He is crowned with glory and honor and will come again, as Isaiah says, "to smite the earth with the rod of his mouth."

Many people, especially many churchgoers, do not like this picture of Jesus. They say, "Imagine describing 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' as ruling with a rod of iron! These are contradictory ideas. This image does not

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Immediately we are reminded of Jesus' words to the woman at the well of Samaria: "If you believe in me, you can draw from me living water and you will never thirst again," {cf, John 4:7-15}. It is a picture of taking from the Lord the emotional strength we need. But what is to be fulfilled in the future in Israel is already available to believers now by the Spirit, from whom we can draw the needs of our spirit. The antidote to fear is faith; the antidote to depression is the joy of the Lord; the antidote to distress of mind and heart is peace of mind. This we can take from him, as we "draw water from the wells of salvation."

The final outcome is that Israel will proclaim this in all the earth:

**And you will say in that day:
"Give thanks to the Lord,
call upon his name;
make known his deeds among the nations,
proclaim that his name is exalted.**

**"Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.
Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." {Isa 12:4:6 RSV}**

That brings us to the application in our own lives:

If we have learned to walk daily in fellowship with "the Holy One of Israel" we, too, will want to "give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, and make known his deeds among the nations."

Have you found that "great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel"?

One Christian has described his experience in these words:

A Song in the Night

In the heat of the day,
I have Jesus.
For a rest on the way,
I have Jesus.
In the calm of the morn,
When a new day is born,
In the midnight hour,
When dark clouds lower,
For each need of my heart,
I have Jesus.

For all of my life,
I have Jesus.
Mid clamor and strife,
I have Jesus.

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

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

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

Prayer:

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

Title: What's Coming Down?
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 11, 12
Message No: 4
Catalog No: 579
Date: December 29, 1985

WHY DO THE NATIONS RAGE?

by Ray C. Stedman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Verse 6 the prophet says:

**Wail, for the day of the Lord is near;
as destruction from the Almighty it will come! {Isa 13:6 RSV}**

Isaiah labels this time of the fall of Babylon as a manifestation of "the day of the Lord," a time of judgment from God, even though that judgment came at the hands of another nation. This is God's process throughout history: he uses one nation to judge another. In World War II, he used Hitler to judge the nations of the world; then he used the other nations to judge Germany under Hitler. Here this judgment is called "the day of the Lord."

In Verse 9 Isaiah repeats this phrase, but he is now talking about a future "day of the Lord," the final, terrible "Day of the Lord." Notice how the language expands here:

**Behold, the day of the Lord comes,
cruel, with wrath and fierce anger,
to make the earth [not the land, but the Earth] a desolation
and to destroy its sinners from it.**

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

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

In Verse 14 through to the end of the chapter, the prophet returns to the historic destruction of the great city of Babylon after its rise to empire status. This is accomplished, we read in Verse 17, by the Medes:

**Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them,
who have no regard for silver
and do not delight in gold. {Isa 13:17 RSV}**

We know that history has fulfilled this in the capture of Babylon under Darius the Mede.

The closing verses of this chapter give the ultimate fate of this great city. Verses 20-24:

**It will never be inhabited
or dwelt in for all generations;
no Arab will pitch his tent there,
no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there.
But wild beasts will lie down there,
and its houses will be full of howling creatures;
there ostriches will dwell,
and there satyrs will dance.
Hyenas will cry in its towers,
and jackals in the pleasant palaces;
its time is close at hand
and its days will not be prolonged. {Isa 13:20-22 RSV}**

This, too, is history now. For centuries the site of Babylon was actually lost. So totally destroyed was the city that no one could even find where it had been located, great as it had been. Only in the early part of this century did the spade of the archaeologist turn it up again. For all those long centuries these words were literally fulfilled. Babylon was a total desolation, without life, except by wild animals.

The animals mentioned, hyenas, jackals, satyrs, ostriches, etc., are not the actual names of the dwellers among the ruins. No one really knows what these words refer to. The animals named are only guesses on the part of the translators. This in itself indicates there is something hidden here. Scripture uses Babylon as the symbol of a terrible evil that pervades our whole race and finds its judgment at last in the terrible scenes of the book of Revelation. In Chapter 17 of that book there is a remarkable description given of a beast with seven heads, upon which is seated a woman. The Apostle John, the writer, says in Verse 4:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We are here looking at what has been called, in theology, "the fall of Satan." Lucifer, the brightest and most beautiful of the angels of God, the nearest to his throne, became so entranced with his own beauty that he rebelled against the government of God and thus became the adversary, Satan. Here he is seen as brought at last to the bottomless pit, mentioned in the book of Revelation.

We are clearly looking beyond the events of earth to that spiritual world which governs those events. As the Apostle Paul put it, "We do not wrestle with flesh and blood, [people are not really the problem] but with wicked spirits in high places, with the rulers of this world's darkness," {cf, Eph 6:12}. What an instructive term that is. The great king of evil is behind all human wrong. This is why the nations rage, why we cannot achieve peace among men at the level of human counsel. We must reckon with these supernatural beings who are behind the mistakes and mistaken deeds of men.

In this passage we learn the origin and the nature of sin. The root of sin is self-occupation. Ezekiel 28 (which is a parallel passage to this), describes the king of Tyre in similar language to this as a supernatural being, and says, "Your heart became proud on account of your beauty and you corrupted your wisdom because of your brightness," {Ezek 28:2, 28:17}. Thus the fundamental character of evil is to become occupied with one's self. This is behind the narcissism of the day in which we live. The media constantly push people to look out for themselves, to speak of "My rights, my desires, my plans. What's in it for me." This is the philosophy that, like a ferment, keeps troubling the pot of international relationships, boiling over again and again in wars and conflicts.

The answer to the question, "Why do the nations rage?" is that Lucifer, the Lightbearer, forgot his dependence on God. In self-sufficiency he uttered these five "I wills" recorded here:

- "I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God;"
- "I will set my throne on high;"
- "I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far north;"
- "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;"
- "I will make myself like the Most High." {Isa 14:13b-14 RSV}

The nature of sin is to play God in our own little world. It does not matter whether you are a believer or an unbeliever, what constitutes sin is to feel you are in control of your own destiny, that you have all it takes to handle life. First John 3:8 says: "If any man commits sin, he is of the devil, for the devil sinned from the beginning." Playing God is the nature of sin. It is an extremely pleasurable experience. We all have felt, from personal experience, "How sweet it is!" We love it. A Christian businessman of my acquaintance wrote of his own experience:

It's my pride that makes me independent of God. It's appealing to feel I am the master of my fate. I run my own life, I call my own shots, I go it alone. But that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can't go it alone. I have to get help from other people. I can't ultimately rely on myself. I'm dependent on God for my very next breath. It's dishonest of me to pretend that I'm anything but a man; small, weak and limited. Living independent of God is self-delusion. It's not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue. It's my inner psychological integrity that's at stake. When I am conceited I'm lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God and not man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself; and that is the national religion of hell.

This is why these passages that deal with Babylon are so significant to us, for we all have Babylon at work in our lives.

Chapters 15 and 16 present what is called "The burden (or the oracle) of Moab." These chapters describe a terrible desolation that is to fall upon Moab. The reason is given in Chapter 16, Verse 6:

**We have heard of the pride of Moab,
how proud he was;
of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence**

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

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

Verse 10 of Chapter 16 describes the fate of Moab:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Old Testament, results in an almost entirely different translation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then the second stage comes:

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

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

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

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

That passage has been interpreted as referring to the Great Pyramid of Egypt. Several cults look to the Great Pyramid as a kind of a prophetic monument, whose dimensions stand for certain numbers of years. (The Rosicrucians here in San Jose have much to say along this line about the Great Pyramid.) But this could hardly be a reference to the Great Pyramid. First, the passage refers to an altar, while the pyramid is but an empty tomb. Secondly, the pyramid was already in existence when Isaiah wrote these words, while this is something that will come into existence "in that day." The pillar, of course, is a reference to the pillar that Jacob erected after his vision of God at the city of Bethel. Thus the altar and the pillar are a sign of Egypt's conversion. They simply speak of a Gentile recognition of the God of Israel and the fact that Egyptians begin to worship that God.

Verse 20 confirms this:

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

Then there is another step of change:

And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. And the Lord will smite Egypt, smiting and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will heed their supplications and heal them. {Isa 19:21-22 RSV}

This "smiting" is the discipline of God. When we come to him today he corrects us, chastising us in order to heal us. This will happen to Egypt in that day.

Then the final stage:

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, [across the land of Israel] and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage." {Isa 19:23-24 RSV}

Clearly this is a millennial scene. The nations will no longer rage and jostle with one another, but peace and harmony will reign throughout the whole of the earth. Assyria and Egypt will cease their ancient enmity and will be recognized, with Israel, as the people of God.

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

The final burden in this section calls upon Tarshish, the colony of Tyre, and Egypt and Sidon to behold the desolation of the Lord upon this city. The prophet inquires why this is coming to pass, asking in Chapter 23, Verse 8:

**Who has purposed this
against Tyre, the bestower of crowns,
whose merchants were princes,
whose traders were the honored of the earth? [The answer comes:]
The Lord of hosts has purposed it,
to defile the pride of all glory,
to dishonor all the honored of the earth. {Isa 23:8-9 RSV}**

Jesus once said, "That which is highly esteemed among men [honored of men] is abomination in the sight of God," {Luke 16:15 KJV}. God despises the love of luxury, the lust for creature comforts, and the pursuit of material gain which Tyre stands for in the Scriptures. Its sin is crass materialism. Tyre is still noted for this. A man told me today that he never saw so many Cadillacs and Mercedes in his life than he saw in Tyre. For seventy years it was judged, following its destruction by Nebuchadnezzar the Great, and then restored, as the prophecy goes on to say in Verse 17.

But in {Verse} 18 we have that great leap of time again. In the end there is a different fate for Tyre:

Her merchandise and her hire will be dedicated to the Lord ["holiness to the Lord"]; it will not be stored or hoarded, but her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who dwell before the Lord. {Isa 23:18 RSV}

Let us remember the words of the apostle in First Corinthians: "Now all these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11). What does he mean? These judgments depict things that are true of us. Babylon, Tyre, Assyria and Egypt appear all the way through the Scriptures, and they always picture the same thing: the world in its varied attack upon us. Egypt is ever the picture of the corruption and defilement of the world. Babylon pictures the deceitfulness of the world and the great Deceiver behind it, using false religion to lead astray. Tyre is a picture of the crass materialism of the world, storing up wealth and treasure for this life only with little concern for that which is to come. Assyria is ever a picture of the violence and cruelty of the world. The other nations mentioned, Moab, Edom, Ammon, and Arabia, depict the enemy we call the "flesh." It is within us, the enemy we are related to. It manifests itself as jealousy, envy, lust, anger, and all those things that are called in Scripture "the works of the flesh," {Gal 5:19}.

Yes, but, in the Lord Jesus, God has a solution to the world, the flesh, and the devil. As we live in relationship to him he provides the power and strength to overcome the world, the flesh, and behind them, the devil. In these passages Isaiah describes in a marvelous way how we too can rely on the presence of the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in our midst, and can daily triumph over these enemies of our faith. Someday it will be Israel that so triumphs. Today it is our right.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, how fantastic it is to see these words of Scripture confirm our experience. They speak of the world as it really is, stripping it bare before our eyes. We have all felt the attractiveness of the world and the flesh. We know these things so well. Thank you for showing us how destructive they are to us; how we, as Christian people, cannot entertain these, but by the power committed to us by the Lord Jesus and his presence in our hearts we

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

Title: Why do the Nations Rage?
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 13-23
Message No: 5
Catalog No: 580
Date: January 5, 1986

THE BLACK HOLES OF LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

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

As I read about those "Black Holes" I thought immediately of what is called in the book of Revelation "the bottomless pit." That term seemed to be an apt description of those space phenomena. Here is what the opening verses of Revelation 20 describe as the use that God makes of the "bottomless pit."

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended. After that he must be loosed for a little while. {Rev 20:1-3 RSV}

That "bottomless pit" comes at the end of the great period of trouble upon the earth, yet future, of which our Lord Jesus himself said, "then shall be great tribulation such as has not been since the beginning of time, nor ever shall be," {cf, Matt 24:21}.

There are many passages of Scripture that point to that terrible period of judgment that is coming upon the earth. In the section of Isaiah we come to today, beginning with Chapter 24, there is a vivid description of that time of trouble that lies yet ahead for the nations of earth. Recognize how clearly this accords with what is in the book of Revelation.

**Behold, the Lord will lay waste the earth and make it desolate,
and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.
And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priests;
as with the slave, so with his master;
as with the maid, so with her mistress;
as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower;
as with the creditor, so with the debtor [all classes of earth are judged alike].
The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled;
for the Lord has spoken this word.
The earth mourns and withers,
the world languishes and withers;**

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

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

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

Most obviously that parallels what the book of Revelation says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The first "woe" is found in Chapter 28.

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

This is further described in Verse 7:

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

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

This, then, is a warning against loving the good life so much that it becomes the chief aim of life. Such a lifestyle produces a paralysis of the spirit. People become dull and apathetic. They stagger about like drunken men, finally giving themselves over to shameful filth and debauchery. This is a description, then, of uncontrolled self-pleasing -- the "self-actualization" we hear so much of today. The New Testament warns of times when "men shall be lovers of pleasure, rather than lovers of God," {2 Tim 3:4 RSV}. This is what Isaiah is warning about. He raises a "Danger Ahead" sign. Woe to those who go this route.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Our Lord Jesus put it very beautifully in one verse in the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and [then] all these things will be added unto you," {Matt 6:33 KJV}. Many Christians have reversed that, giving themselves continually to efforts to get ahead, forgetting that they are to put first the things of God. Forget about status symbols and accumulation of wealth. Seek godliness first -- concern yourself with being a righteous man or woman right where you are. The promise is that then God can trust you with the things of wealth. All these things that "the Gentiles seek after," Jesus said, "can then be added safely to you," {cf, Matt 6:32}.

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

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

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

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

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

Israel's problem was what we would call "mechanical religion," meaningless, external conformity to a performance of religious things. This is a grave danger. When you feel yourself becoming dull spiritually, it is a warning sign that says, "Watch out! You are headed for trouble." This happens to all of us on occasion. It is healthy to ask yourself at times, "Have I lost my zest for God? Do I sing the hymns mechanically? Do the truths of Scripture appear to me dull and common place? Have I lost the sense of joy in my Christian experience?" That is a danger sign. That is what this "woe" is referring to. There is a Black Hole ahead into which you are being drawn.

God's provision for this is found in the latter part of Verse 5 and in Verse 6:

**And in an instant, suddenly,
you will be visited by the Lord of hosts
with thunder and with earthquake and great noise,
with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire. {Isa 29:5b-6 RSV}**

Suddenly God will send into your life some experience -- a disaster, perhaps -- something that will get your immediate and undivided attention. That is God's action to wake you up to the danger of drifting away from the vitality of a spiritual walk.

I have always appreciated the story of the two students at Duke University who went to a costume party dressed as blue devils, the mascots of Duke. They started out to the party, but by mistake they stumbled into a prayer meeting, setting off a great exodus through the doors and windows. One rather stout lady became wedged in a pew and began to scream in terror. Forgetting that they were causing her agony, the two young men rushed forward to help her. As she saw them advancing she raised her hand and said, "Stop! Don't you come any further. I want you to know that I have been a member of this church for 25 years -- but I've been on your side all the time!" That is what we call a moment of truth. It is a very valuable experience.

At times God will send something that wakes you up suddenly to the drift in your life. This is why he has spoken so helpfully through the prophets and the apostles, warning us of the danger of spiritual drift and the danger of mechanically living as a Christian.

The third "woe" comes in the middle of Chapter 29. Verse 15:

**Woe to those who hide deep from the Lord their counsel,
whose deeds are in the dark,
and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"
You turn things upside down!
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay;
that the thing made should say of its maker,
"He did not make me";
or the thing formed say of him who formed it,
"He has no understanding"? {Isa 29:15-16 RSV}**

Here the danger is the error of thinking that the Lord does not see what is going on in your life. This is a widespread danger today among Christians. Some actually believe they can allow evil thoughts, pornography, bitterness, attitudes of hate and rebellion, etc., to pervade their minds and that God does not see this, and even if he does, he will do nothing about it.

Notice how the prophet reacts to that. Verse 16 is a cry of amazement: "You turn things upside down! Do you really think that the One who made you does not know you, that he does not understand what is going on in your life?" It is incredible that anyone would allow himself to think that way. Yet many people feel that God is so remote from their lives he has no real interest in what they are doing. When we begin to feel that way we are in need of a warning, a stop sign that says, "Watch out! You are drifting into danger."

Verses 18-19 describe what that condition requires.

**In that day the deaf shall hear
the words of a book,
and out of their gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind shall see.
The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord,
and the poor among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel. {Isa 29:18-19 RSV}**

Notice the change of attitude. Instead of proud confidence that they can go on their own way with impunity there is a change. Those who have been deaf to the words of God begin to read the words of the Book; the eyes of the blind are able to see, and the meek again experience fresh joy in the Lord. Bring your condition to God and ask him to restore to you the joy, the sense of vitality, the living quality of truth.

The latter part of Verse 23 shows what will happen to those who do this.

**They will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob,
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel. {Isa 29:23b RSV}**

Rather than imagining God to be unconcerned and indifferent, they will wonder at his majesty and greatness.

**And those who err in spirit will come to understanding,
and those who murmur will accept instruction. {Isa 29:24 RSV}**

That is the mercy of God, raising a warning signal to men to turn and recover the blessing they have proudly set aside.

The fourth "woe" comes in the opening verse of Chapter 30:

**"Woe to the rebellious children," says the Lord,
"who carry out a plan, but not mine;
and who make a league, but not of my spirit,
that they may add sin to sin;
who set out to go down to Egypt,
without asking for my counsel,
to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh,
and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt!" {Isa 30:1-2 RSV}**

This is the danger of self-confidence, the danger of an arrogant and rebellious spirit that despises God's counsel. Someone has well said,

Trained men's minds are spread so thin
They let all sorts of darkness in.
When they find light, they tend to doubt it.
They don't love light, just talk about it.

This is the condition of man who really do not want to hear what the Lord says. Verse 9 further describes such people:

**For they are a rebellious people,
lying sons,
sons who will not hear
the instruction of the Lord;
who say to the seers "See not,"
and to the prophets, "Prophecy not to us what is right;
speak to us smooth things,
prophecy illusions,
leave the way, turn aside from the path,
let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel." {Isa 30:9-11 RSV}**

What a rebellious, arrogant spirit that describes! Such a one is headed for a Black Hole of destruction. It lies

not far ahead.

Verse 15 describes what is needed.

**For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel,
"In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." {Isa 30:15a RSV}**

Here is a marvelous invitation. God is saying, "You are headed for trouble, but if you will turn around you will find what you are looking for 'in quietness and trust shall be your strength.'"

The condition of the one who responds is described in Verses 20-22:

And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. Then you will defile your silver-covered graven images and your gold-plated molten images [your false gods]. You will scatter them as unclean things; you will say to them, "Begone!" {Isa 30:20-22 RSV}

The effect of truth upon a life is that of guidance: one hears a voice behind saying, "The decision you have made is right; walk in it." He will turn away from the false gods of the world: lust, pleasure, fame, the pursuit of public recognition and self-exaltation and find quietness. Your Teacher will instruct you from the Word itself.

The fifth "woe" is in Chapter 31:

**Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help
and rely on horses,
who trust in chariots because they are many
and in horsemen because they are very strong,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel
or consult the Lord!
And yet he is wise and brings disaster,
he does not call back his words,
but will arise against the house of the evildoers,
and against the helpers of those who work iniquity. {Isa 31:1-2 RSV}**

Here the danger lies not in self-confidence but in a misplaced confidence, in trusting the counsel of another-especially (as it is pointed out here) that which is pictured by Egypt. Egypt is always a symbol of the world in its wisdom. Here is a warning against following this kind of worldly wisdom.

The problem with it is stated in Verse 3:

**The Egyptians are men and not God;
and their horses are flesh and not spirit.
When the Lord stretches out his hand,
the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall,
and they will all perish together. {Isa 31:3 RSV}**

I see that happening to many people who take the judgment of the world instead of the counsel of God. Many have brought their marital problems to counselors who were unbelievers and were told, "If you do not get along with your mate, get a divorce. You don't have to subject yourself to strife." Some have followed this advice, and have found, as the prophet warns here, "the Egyptians are but men, and their horses are but flesh." They will all perish at last. Taking such counsel will only open you up to far greater agony and pain than you had before.

Rather than working their problems through according to the guidance of the Lord, there is a commitment

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

What should one do? The answer comes in the opening words of Chapter 32, which is part of this fifth woe:

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

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

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

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

The final "woe" is found in Chapter 33.

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

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

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

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

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

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

the pressures of life.

Verses 21-22 state what God promises in this connection.

**But there the Lord in majesty will be for us
a place of broad rivers and streams,
where no galley with oars can go,
nor stately ship can pass [no warship can attack].
For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our ruler,
the Lord is our king; he will save us. {Isa 33:21-22 RSV}**

There are the six Black Holes of life:

1. Self-pleasing,
2. Religious externalism,
3. Self-deceit,
4. Wrongly placed confidence,
5. Rebellious attitude, and
6. Cruel attack upon others.

These are the danger areas where God in his mercy erects a sign that says, "Stop! Listen! Beware!" The Apostle Paul gives us a marvelous explanation of God's dealings with us in this connection. "If we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened, so that we may not be condemned along with the world," {1 Cor 11:31-32 RSV}.

How foolish we are to follow the values and counsels of the world, poured daily into our minds through television, radio, and the press. Let us never forget that it is the world that is suffering from illusions and delusions. Its principles are wrong, hurtful and destructive. Much of the agony of life comes from the commitment that people often unconsciously make to these principles. But God has given us guidelines and wisdom from on high.

Isaiah 34, which returns to the final judgments of earth, is another terrible scene. But it emerges at last in Chapter 35 in a beautiful picture of the inner life of those who rest upon the strength of God in the midst of the world around.

**Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, fear not!
Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you." [That is the refuge of the believer.]
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then shall the lame man leap like a hart,
and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert; {Isa 35:3-6 RSV}**

Verse 8:

**And a highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not pass over it,
and fools shall not err therein.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;**

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

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

Our inheritance is peace, love and joy. Inwardly we are to have those no matter what the world around us is like. If we feed upon the riches of truth given to us, and live in daily fellowship with the Lord who is our present possession, then those refreshing graces will possess our hearts.

I close with the marvelous words of James Russell Lowed,

Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet 'tis truth alone that's strong.
Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne.

Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadows.
Keeping watch above his own.

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for these wonderful words of reassurance, that you know and understand life to the full and You tell us what it is like if we will but listen. Remove the blindness from our eyes. Open our hearts to the great riches that are waiting for us in fellowship with our living, loving Lord. Help us to pursue these, to become obedient to truth, to be searchers after the revelation that you have given that we may be effective and powerful in our witness in the world in which we live today. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Title: The Black Holes of Life
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 24-35
Message No: 6
Catalog No: 581
Date: January 12, 1986

FAITH AND FOLLY

by Ray C. Stedman

Christians sometimes jokingly quote what are purported to be verses of Scripture, such as, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," "God helps those who help themselves," etc. When they are asked for a reference, they reply, "The book of Hezekiah." There is no such book in the Bible, of course, but Chapters 36-39 of the book of Isaiah are the closest thing to it.

These chapters are a prose account of the fading of Assyria from the biblical scene and the rise of the nation Babylon. Assyria was the main threat to Israel in the first half of this book, while in the second half. Babylon

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

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

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

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

The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,
His cohorts were gleaming with purple and gold.
The sheen of his spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

I hope you are following in your Bibles at home these great lessons from the book of Isaiah. We must move so swiftly through them that there is much I am passing over, but do read the full account at home.

According to this account, Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, was personally involved in the siege of Lachish, a city west of Jerusalem, while he detached a part of his army, under his general, Rabshakeh, to besiege Jerusalem. The general takes his stand at an historic spot, the very place where, 40 years before, God had told Isaiah to stand when he gave to Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, the sign of the virgin's son. Rabshakeh seems to be puzzled by the resistance of the Jews and their seeming confidence that he will fail in his efforts to take the city, as the next verses point out.

And the Rabshakeh said to them, "Say to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest this confidence of yours? Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? On whom do you now rely, that you have rebelled against me?'" {Isa 36:4-5 RSV}

Notice the puzzlement in his words. He goes on to list what he thinks to be their resources.

'Behold, you are relying on Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him.' {Isa 36:6 RSV}

Egypt would be no help to them, he says. Then, remembering that Israel was a religious nation, he asks was it Jehovah they were relying on? He reminds Hezekiah that the king himself had ordered the destruction of many of the high altars around Jerusalem that were dedicated to the worship of Jehovah. What the pagan general failed to realize, of course, was that those altars were built in opposition to God's word, that the only place he was to be worshipped was in the temple in Jerusalem. Hezekiah himself had torn down these rival altars.

Next, Rabshakeh suggests that Hezekiah is perhaps counting on his own army to withstand the Assyrian attack. He offers the king a wager which he feels he cannot lose, saying sarcastically, "I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders upon them." Thus, in words dripping with irony, he points out the weakness of Judah from a military viewpoint. Finally, Rabshakeh returns to the idea that Israel is depending upon God for deliverance, saying in verse 10:

"Moreover, is it without the Lord that I have come up against this land to destroy it? The Lord said to me, Go up against this land, and destroy it." {Isa 36:10a RSV}

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

Here we have a vivid picture of the world's attack upon a believer. Assyria, as we have already noted, is a picture of the violence and the anger of the world directed against faith. You perhaps have experienced this contempt. You may have been subjected to it at work. You may have run into it at school from an atheistic professor who heaped ridicule on Christianity, making you feel like two cents before the class. This anger can be carried to extremes.

We think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young Lutheran pastor who withstood the Nazis during the Second World War, finally giving his life in his defense of the faith.

Even at this moment hundreds of thousands of Christians are facing ridicule and shame, even threat to their lives, by the attack of the world upon their faith.

When the official deputation tried to quiet Rabshakeh, and thus limit his impact on the listening Jews, he responds by becoming even more insulting.

Then Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshekah, "Pray, speak to your servants in Aramaic [not in Hebrew as he had been doing], for we understand it; do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall." But the Rabshakeh said, "Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and drink their own urine?" {Isa 36:11-12 RSV}

These insulting words depict the imminent scenes of famine as Rabshekah, laying siege to the city, reduces it to these terrible conditions. This also pictures the impact the world oftentimes has upon Christians in its attack upon their faith. Such contempt can have a demoralizing effect.

But, despite the appeal made to him, the Rabshekah goes on to urge the people loudly -- and in Hebrew -- to not let Hezekiah deceive them, to not let him "make you rely on the Lord," to not "listen" to him, and to "beware lest Hezekiah deceive you." First, he says, Hezekiah cannot deliver them; he is powerless. Second, he charges, Hezekiah's faith is groundless; it is nothing but words. Third, he promises that Assyria will treat them kindly and give them a prosperous land if they will but surrender. Finally, he implies that the God they depend on is, in his estimation, as powerless as the gods of the cities the Assyrians have already overcome.

The Israelites respond to this with silence.

But they were silent and answered him not a word, for the king's command was, "Do not answer him." Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna, the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes rent, and told him the words of the Rabshakeh. {Isa 36:21-22 RSV}

Silence may be the best response to such insulting verbal attack. And, more than silence, with sackcloth, as we see in the opening verse of Chapter 37.

When King Hezekiah heard it, he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord. {Isa 37:1 RSV}

Sack cloth symbolizes humility, personal admission to whatever complicity on our part has contributed to the judgment we are facing. Thus King Hezekiah humbles himself, and takes his problem into the house of the Lord. In our experience this could correspond with taking the matter to God in prayer, humbly admitting our failures, agreeing that we have been justified, exposed to threat, and looking to God for help. That is what the king does next. He sends Eliakim and Shebna to Isaiah the prophet, seeking a word from the Lord. How helpful this word is. When you are faced with a threat to your own faith it is wise to act as Hezekiah does here -- personally humble yourself, and seek an answer from the mind of the Lord in his word.

Isaiah supplies that answer to the king.

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

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

The Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libnah [a city of Israel]; for he had heard that the king had left Lachish. Now [while he was there] the king heard concerning Tirhakah king of Ethiopia, "He has set out to fight against you." [That was the rumor which the prophet had said the king of Assyria would hear.] And when he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying, "Thus shall you speak to Hezekiah king of Judah: 'Do not let your God on whom you rely deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, destroying them utterly. And shall you be delivered?'" {Isa 37:8-11 RSV}

This communication came in the form of a letter to Hezekiah. Clearly, it was intended to keep his heart fearful and anxious. It was a threat for the future, saying that although the king of Assyria was leaving for the moment, he would return again to wreak a terrible vengeance on Judah. Had Hezekiah taken the Assyrian message in that way, he would have lived in constant fear.

It is very important for Christians to understand that God does not want his people to live in fear. Fear is one of the great perils of our day. Anxieties beset us on every hand. We need to hear again the words of Jesus, "Do not be anxious about tomorrow." Again and again our Lord told his disciples, "Fear not." Paul says, "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, of love and a sound mind." It is not within our power to remove these threats to us, but we can meet them with faith. This is what Hezekiah does.

Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.

Have you ever gone into your bedroom, knelt beside your bed, and spread your problem before the Lord? That is the only proper response to a threat to your person or faith.

Here is the king's wonderful prayer.

And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord: "O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, who art enthroned above the cherubim, thou art the God, thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth. Incline thy ear, O Lord, and hear; open thy eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Of a truth, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire; for they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone; therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou alone art the Lord." {Isa 37:15-20 RSV}

Notice how accurate this prayer is. Hezekiah acknowledges the facts as they are. Assyria is a powerful force that had already swept other kingdoms away before it, but these nations were depending on idols to protect them, while Hezekiah's dependence is on the Lord of heaven and earth. To him Hezekiah prays, simply and plainly, for help.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All took place as the God of history had ordained.

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

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

A careful look at the chronology reveals that Hezekiah was only 39 years old at this point. Verses 10-20 records, after the fact, how he felt during his illness. He begins by describing his sense of despair.

**I said, In the noontime of my days
I must depart;
I am consigned to the gates of Sheol
for the rest of my years.
I said, I shall not see the Lord
in the land of the living;
I shall look upon man no more**

among the inhabitants of the world. {Isa 38:10-11 RSV}

He goes on to describe how deprived he feels, as he despairs of fulfilling the years he should have been granted. Anyone who has suffered a serious illness can relate to these words as they express the sense of foreboding one feels during a time of sickness.

Now let us read Isaiah's word to the king, found in Verses 4-6:

Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: "Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and defend this city." {Isa 38:4-6 RSV}

This wonderful promise to Hezekiah must have come at the time the king of Assyria was assaulting Jerusalem, thus it must be read in conjunction with Chapters 36 and 37. We are told that Hezekiah was granted a reprieve; fifteen years were added to his life. During those years a son, Manasseh, was born to him. Manasseh went on to become the worst king Israel ever had. We are reminded of the "wheels within wheels" by which God deals with us at times. When he grants us what we have prayed for, that may also open doors for other circumstances which we would not have chosen.

But God did hear the prayer of the king and grant him these fifteen years. Verses 16-20, written after this promise was made, reflect a new spirit of hope. In line with God's grace, Verse 21 gives Isaiah's directions for Hezekiah's recovery.

Now Isaiah had said, "Let them take a cake of figs, and apply it to the boil, that he may recover." Hezekiah also had said, "What is the sign that I shall go up to the house of the Lord?" {Isa 38:21-22 RSV}

The king may have been suffering from a form of cancer -- melanoma, perhaps -- and this cake of figs was to be applied to it to draw out the purulent matter and speed the healing.

Hezekiah had asked what sign would he receive so that he should "go up to the house of the Lord?" i.e. resume his daily worship. Verse 7 gives that sign:

"This is the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do this thing that he has promised: Behold, I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz turn back ten steps." So the sun turned back on the dial the ten steps by which it had declined. {Isa 38:7-8 RSV}

Would God do such a remarkable thing merely to encourage this king's faith? Obviously it was meant to be more than that. Recall that when Rabshakeh spoke to the deputation from Jerusalem he stood at an extremely significant and historic spot before the wall of the city "the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field" the exact spot where Isaiah had given the sign of the virgin's son. That sign also was not designed only for the benefit of Ahaz, but for the benefit of the whole world, the whole universe. Here then was another sign that would be manifest throughout the whole world, for to cause the shadow of the sun to turn backward on a sundial meant that some major physical change had to occur on the earth.

Certain critics hold that the earth must have stopped its rotation, and there is no record that that phenomenon ever occurred. But the sign given to Hezekiah did not require that. Scientists now know that a shift in the axis of the earth would have such a result. Doubtless that is what happened for science has also discovered that at various times in the past the axis of the earth (the slant of the earth in relationship to the sun) has suddenly changed. That would cause the shadow on the sundial to turn back.

This miracle links also with Chapter 39, the closing chapter of this section, which describes a visit by ambassadors from Babylon to Hezekiah. According to Second Chronicles 32, they came because they saw the sign which was given to Hezekiah and they wanted to investigate what was going on in Israel that resulted in such dramatic changes in the course of nature. This indicates the tremendous interest God has in what happens

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What this is meant to teach us, of course, is that prosperity is a greater threat than adversity. When we are challenged, attacked and insulted, we naturally run to the Lord as our defender. Ah, but when we are offered a new position, with a higher salary, and to take it we must remove ourselves and our families from the influences that have shaped us morally and spiritually; or when our work is of such a nature that we are taken away from time we should spend "seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" {cf, Matt 6:33}, it is then we are being exposed to the subtle trap of Babylon. We have all known people who have fallen into this trap, losing spiritual vitality sometimes for years because they failed to heed warnings concerning the allurements of the world.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn tells of having once a very close friend while he was imprisoned in the Gulag. They saw eye to eye on everything. They enjoyed the same things, they liked to discuss the same subjects. Solzhenitsyn thought their friendship would last a lifetime. To his astonishment, however, when his friend was offered a privileged position in the prison system he accepted it. That was the first step in a change in his friend that ultimately saw him end up as a torturer who devised horrible and cruel torments against Soviet prisoners. Solzhenitsyn described the fear in his own heart when he realized that simple decisions, made in a moment, in the face of an offer of prosperity, could wreck a life, though attack and personal insult were unable to shake one's faith.

The great test of faith comes not when we receive news that offends us, insults us, or seems to threaten our

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

Prayer:

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

Title: Faith and Folly
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 36-39
Message No: 7
Catalog No: 582
Date: January 19, 1986

WHO IS LIKE OUR GOD?

by Ray C. Stedman

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

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

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

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

Today, too, Jew and Gentile alike are given the same wonderful announcement concerning our sins in Paul's

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

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

A voice cries:

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

We need not be in doubt as to whose voice this is, for the gospels record that this is what John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord, declared about himself. John announced that he was the fulfillment of this promise. The gospel of John records that a delegation from Jerusalem inquired of John, "Who are you?" {John 1:19 KJV}. The account states, "He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, I am not the Christ [the Messiah] {cf, John 1:20}. And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" {John 1:21a RSV}. He said, "I am not," {John 1:21b}. "Are you the prophet?" {John 1:21c RSV}. And he answered, "No," {John 1:21d}. They said to him then, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" {John 1:22 RSV}. He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said," {John 1:23 RSV}.

In Verse 6 the first voice, the voice of God, speaks again:

**A voice says, "Cry!"
And I [the second voice] said, "What shall I cry?"
[The answer is] All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people is grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand for ever. {Isa 40:6-8 RSV}**

These two passages define the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of our Lord. He was to declare that when the Messiah came, his ministry would not only be one of reconciliation, but also one of reconstruction. He declared there would be a highway, built in the heart, for God to travel on. Four steps would be involved in the building process: "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low, the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places plain." Construction engineers know that this is exactly how highways are built yet today.

In this beautiful symbolic language the prophet is saying that this is what God undertakes when he comes into our lives. When we have received his forgiveness, the next step is that he begins to change us, to reconstruct our lives. "Every valley is lifted up." In the low places of life, the discouraging times, times when you feel crushed and defeated, there will be comfort and encouragement from the Lord. Also, "Every mountain shall be brought down." All those places where our ego manifests itself, our proud boasts, our graspings for power, these must be cut down. We find ourselves humbled in many ways. Then, "The crooked places will be made

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

Ah, but it is more than that, as we see in Verses 6-8. It is a word of *reassurance* as well. What is man? "All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field." All the great things we boast about will fade away and disappear. All man's knowledge and power will amount to nothing. "The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; ... but the word of our God will stand for ever." What a comfort that ought to be to us. Our natural strength will never accomplish what we want; human help will fail us. "But the word of our God will stand forever."

What comes after the reconciliation, the reconstruction, and the reassurance? The voice continues.

**"Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings,
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
'Behold your God!'" {Isa 40:9 RSV}**

This is a word of witness, a proclamation that always follows, never precedes, the work of reconciliation, reconstruction and reassurance. We of the evangelical world have failed to understand this. We try to train people to go out and do witnessing. I have always regretted that. That is not the correct approach at all. Jesus did not say to his followers, "Behold I send you forth to do witnessing." He said, "Behold, I send you to be witnesses," {cf, Matt 10:16, Luke 10:3, Acts 1:8}. A witness is one who talks about what happened to him. If nothing has happened to you, you do not have anything to say. If you cannot tell somebody of God's grace in your life, you cannot be a witness. All you can witness to is your knowledge of a certain set of verses, perhaps, and that is not true witnessing. Ah, but if something has happened, if you have been changed, if you sense the work of God in your heart, then "lift up your voice" and say to the all the people around, "Behold your God."

What kind of a God? The voice goes on:

**Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd,
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young. {Isa 40:10-11 RSV}**

What a tender, beautiful scene is portrayed in that last verse. But there are two portraits of God here. The God we proclaim is the God who is a Judge, with power and might to overcome all who resist him, all who attempt to deceive him or ignore him. But he is also a Shepherd. Those who cast themselves upon him he will nourish with tender care, even the feeblest among them, "and gently lead those that are with young." These, beautiful words remind us of Jesus' own words in John 10, where he says of himself, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep," {John 10:11 RSV}.

Verse 11 brings to mind the words of Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul."

The rest of the chapter gathers around a theme that is given to us twice, in Verses 18 and 25:

**To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him? [Who is like God?] {Isa 40:18 RSV}**

And again in Verse 25:

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

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

Listen to these words in Verse 12:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How many thousands through the centuries have taken those promises literally and found that to "wait upon the Lord" does this very thing. It all hinges on that one word, *wait*. Wait! The hardest word to learn in the language for some, especially young people. Wait. Let God work. The Hebrew word has a note of expectation about it: expect God to work, wait in expectation that God will move. It takes time, you cannot have it overnight, but they that wait upon the Lord shall find their own strength renewed. They shall find their spirit mounting up like the eagle in its flight, their souls able to run the gamut of emotions. They shall never be weary. And they shall walk (in body) and not faint.

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

**Who stirred up one from the east
whom victory meets at every step? {Isa 41:2a RSV}**

In later chapters this one will be identified as Cyrus the Mede, who was God's instrument for the deliverance of his people from the idolatry of Babylon.

In Verses 8-9 God describes their unbelief in the midst of this:

**But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
and called from its farthest corners,**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A word of contempt follows:

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

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

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

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

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

But when I look there is no one;

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

That is all the idols of man can deliver!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He will be unassuming and obscure.

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

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

He would be patient and gentle:

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

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

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

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

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

All this clearly applies to our Lord.

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

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

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

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

Then God speaks even more intimately,

Because you are precious in my eyes,

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

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

Then comes the promise of ultimate gathering:

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

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

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

This is the promise that is described here.

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

**"You are my witnesses," says the Lord,
"and my servant whom I have chosen,
that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am He. {Isa 43:10a RSV}**

That is God's purpose for calling anyone to himself: that you may know him, that you may understand him, and believe him. The reason for this is that he is absolutely unique and does what no other can do.

**Before me no god was formed,
nor shall there be any after me.
I, I am the Lord,
and besides me there is no savior. {Isa 43:10b-11 RSV}**

There is no savior besides the Lord. He, alone, has power to deliver men from their sins.

This brings to mind those wonderful words of the angels to the shepherds at Bethlehem, "Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy which shall be to all people, for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior," {cf, Luke 2:10-11a}. This verse in Isaiah says there is no Savior besides the Lord: "I am the Lord and besides me there is no savior." But the angels declare, "there is born to you this day ... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord," {cf, Luke 2:11}. Clearly, Jehovah is Jesus, and Jesus is Jehovah.

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

Title: Who is Like our God
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 40-43
Message No: 8
Catalog No: 583
Date: January 26, 1986

GOD OF SPACE AND TIME

by Ray C. Stedman

Our nation was stunned and shocked at the deaths of seven astronauts at Cape Canaveral on Tuesday last. I could not help but think that the tragedy confirmed much of what we have been learning in Isaiah's prophecy, especially his words from last week, "All flesh is but grass, and its beauty as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever," {cf, Isa 40:6-8}. James says, "Our life is but a vapor which appears for a little while and then vanishes away," {cf, Jas 4:14}. Certainly that was dramatically illustrated in the shuttle tragedy. One moment the astronauts were with us, smiling and laughing, and the next moment they were gone, vanished from the earth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A couple of weeks ago my wife and I were in Palm Springs, sharing in a ministry with Dr. Lewis Smedes, a professor from Fuller Seminary. He went to the Los Angeles county jail one day to spend a few hours helping some of the prisoners there with their spiritual problems. As he was eating alone in the cafeteria at lunch time, he met a man, a lawyer, who spends a whole day each week helping prisoners in the county jail. But he did not use his legal expertise to counsel them. He sought instead to help by reading the Scriptures to them and aiding them in spiritual matters. (In order to help in that he wore a clerical collar.) Dr. Smedes said to him, "Don't you find it rather depressing, working with these losers all the time?" The man replied, "I don't look at them that way. To me there are only two kinds of people in the world: the forgiven and the unforgiving. These men and women are locked up physically. You can find a key, open the door and let them out, but no one yet has found the key that opens their inner life except God." That is a beautiful expression of what Isaiah is saying. If you are locked up inside yourself, prisoner to your own pride and self-sufficiency, God can open the door and let you out. This is what he promises to do and has done for centuries.

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

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

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

When we read a passage like this we are tempted to say, "Surely this does not apply to us. We are not idol worshippers." But we are really not that far removed from this kind of practice. As I drive down here on Sunday mornings I often notice people out in their yards worshipping a shiny, bright, metal idol. They pour expensive fluids into it, polish and shine it, and bow down before it. Have you ever noticed the change that comes over them when they get into it and take off down the street? Mild, inoffensive people, who never utter a word in anger, blast out of their driveways, leaving a trail of rubber as they depart, transformed with an illusion of power. We worship the automobile, which has become the symbol of luxury, beauty and power.

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

behind them remain the central idols of the American people.

The prophet declares of the idolater, Verse 20:

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

The folly of worshipping any god other than the true God is that people deceive themselves. They are left dissatisfied, feeling, they have been feeding on ashes. The soul, as well as the body, needs food. It looks for that which satisfies. But those who look for satisfaction in drugs or sex discover that they have been feeding on ashes. They have been deceived, failing to recognize that there is "a lie in their right hand." The right hand is the symbol of what you grasp, who you look for help from. But those who follow idols are unable to see that they will not satisfy, but will leave a taste of ashes in the mouth. Many businessmen worship the god of power. They are climbing the corporate ladder to the top, seeking honor and recognition, dreaming of the prerequisites of the presidency of the company. When they have all they want, however, they will find it has turned to ashes. Many students worship knowledge. They feel confident that the wonderful things they are learning will help them control life. But it all turns to ashes. They do not recognize the "lie that is in the right hand."

The only hope, as this passage makes clear, is found in the God who formed us. God says:

**Remember these things, O Jacob,
and Israel, for you are my servant; [remember the ashes upon which you have been feeding]
I formed you, you are my servant;
O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.
I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud,
and your sins like mist;
return to me, for I have redeemed you. {Isa 44:21-22 RSV}**

Over and over again, as we have seen all through this prophecy, the heart of God breaks through to plead with his people to find their satisfaction in him. He pleads for them to turn from these false values and seek his face and his forgiveness, which he has already provided for them, having "swept away their transgressions like a cloud." They may claim this forgiveness by believing that it applies to them.

A chapter division should come in at this point, after verse 23, for the closing verses of Chapter 44 really belong with Chapter 45. Here is an amazing prediction, already historically fulfilled, of the coming of Cyrus the Great of Persia, the conqueror of Babylon. Isaiah has foreseen and described the threat of Babylon, that great empire of the ancient world. Even though Babylon had not yet come into prominence as a world power, Isaiah sees beyond its rise under Nebuchadnezzar and his conquering of much of the world, to the time when the Persians shall rise and Cyrus the Great will come and take Babylon captive. Cyrus is actually named here in this prophecy, 150 years before his birth.

**Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer,
who formed you from the womb:
"I am the Lord, who made all things,
who stretched out the heavens alone,
who spread out the earth -- Who was with me? --
who frustrates the omens of liars,
and makes fools of diviners;
who turns wise men back,
and makes their knowledge foolish;
who confirms the word of his servant,
and performs the counsel of his messengers;
who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,'
and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built,
and I will raise up their ruins'; {Isa 44:24-27 RSV}**

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

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

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

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

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

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

God says to Cyrus, Verse 4:

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

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

God gives another very important word in Verse 7:

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

Cyrus and the Persian people were followers of Zoroaster, a philosopher who believed in monotheism (a single god), whom they called the god of Light, and another supernatural being opposing him, whom they called the god of Darkness. Here God claims that he created both light and darkness. He goes on:

**I make weal and create woe,
I am the Lord, who do all these things. {Isa 45:7b RSV}**

In the phrase "weal and woe," God is speaking of circumstances; that he is behind the circumstances of calamity, as well as of blessing. We must view the tragedy at Cape Canaveral in the light of a verse like this. As the moral Judge of the universe, God says that he takes responsibility even for disasters but as the Savior of man he also is behind the blessings that come our way. Isaiah strongly sets forth the fact that God is in total control of all of life.

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

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

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

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

This is the God with whom we have to deal. How incredibly arrogant of man to criticize the workings of a God like that! This passage is designed to humble man in his proud confidence and to show him how dependent he is upon the God whom he dares to criticize. C.S. Lewis well has said, "To argue with God is to argue with the very power that makes it possible to argue at all." How foolish man is to attempt that!"

From this passage we learn that human folly takes many forms: either self-sufficiency -- man imagining that he is God and that he can run the world -- or idolatry, where man trusts something else as god other than the true God. Either one, according to this account and as confirmed by history, results in slavery and tragedy. This is what is behind the rise of totalitarianism in our day.

Some years ago I ran across a very astute statement about this subject. Someone has written:

If a man does not believe in God, his own ego becomes the ruler of his life. Since there are no standards of right and wrong existing apart from himself, right becomes that which pleases him, and wrong that which does not minister to his ego. Since he himself is the supreme consideration, he is restrained by nothing but his own wishes, and easily reaches the conclusion that the best possible world is one in which his will is supreme. He therefore enforces it upon others to the limit of his ability.

The denial of God thus becomes the seed from which totalitarianism develops. Freedom is possible only if men believe in God and seek to do his will. William Penn was right when he said that if men will not be governed by God, they must be governed by tyrants.

That is a remarkable statement of what the Scriptures declare -- that throughout history, behind the rise of slavery and bondage, is this inevitable substituting of the supreme will of an egoist for the mind of God.

God's answer is found in Verses 22-23 of this same chapter:

**"Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other. {Isa 45:22-23 RSV}**

How hopeless it is for man to find his own way out of the morass which he has made for himself! The Spirit of God used this verse to speak to the heart of a fifteen-year-old boy in England in the last century. That boy, Charles Hadden Spurgeon, took shelter in a little Methodist chapel on a cold and snowy day in 1850. As there was no preacher, the deacon read the text, "Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth," and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many times (like Jesus weeping over Jerusalem), God bewails the fact that men in their obstinacy will not come to him and be set free.

The chapter and the section close with this revealing word:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is our privilege to do that now, when confessing his name means salvation. Ultimately the whole universe will confess it, but then it will merely be an admission that he was what he claimed to be. Till then, "there is no peace to the wicked."

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

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

Prayer:

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

Title: God of Space and Time
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 44-48
Message No: 9
Catalog No: 584
Date: February 2, 1986

BEHOLD THE MESSIAH

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Romans opens with the Apostle Paul's statement that he was "called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son," {Rom 1:1b-3a RSV}. It is that prophetic foreview of the work of our Lord Jesus and the gospel, that occupies our attention in "the gospel according to Isaiah." This section, beginning with Chapter 49, provides perhaps the clearest picture in the whole Bible of the ministry of Jesus. It is an amazing passage which leads us to the very Holy of Holies, which the 53rd chapter of this book represents. This prophecy was given 725 years before our Lord appeared. A modern counterpart of that would be if someone in the twelfth century, during the time of the Crusades, had written a document that described in accurate detail, including his name, the Presidency of Ronald Reagan in twentieth century America. That is how accurate the predictive element of this section is.

Chapter 49 opens with the Servant of Jehovah describing his own ministry.

**Listen to me, O coastlands,
and hearken, you peoples from afar.
The Lord called me from the womb,
from the body of my mother he named my name.
He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
But I said, "I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the Lord,
and my recompense with my God."**

**And now the Lord says,
who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,**

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

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

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

In this section we can see that both the nation and the servant are called Israel "Israel, my servant" and yet they are clearly distinguished. This is the answer to those, particularly among the Jews, who say this is not referring to a man but to the nation only. Clearly both figures are reflected here.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But *Yahweh* reminds them, in Verses 15-16:

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

That is God's word that he will not forget his promises to Israel. Paul takes this up in Chapters 9, 10 and 11 of Romans, and asks the question, "Has God cast off his people whom he knew?" {cf, Rom 11:2a KJV}. His answer is, "Absolutely not." God will fulfill these promises.

Here Jehovah reminds them, "Though you may feel neglected and forgotten, I cannot cast you off. I will never forget you, 'Can a mother forget her sucking child?'" Proverbially, of course, mother love is the strongest love of all. Many mothers continue to love their children no matter what they do. But it is unfortunately true that mothers can forget their children. This week the papers were filled with an account of a mother in New York who systematically suffocated all nine of her children. Mothers can forget their children, but God cannot: "Behold, I have inscribed you, engraved you on the palms of my hands." We are reminded of that scene in the gospels when Jesus, after his resurrection, appeared to his frightened disciples, huddled together in the upper room, and said to them, "Behold, my hands and my feet and see that it is I," {cf, Luke 24:39}. Those wounds in his hands were marks of love and their very names were engraved in his hands.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 50 continues with God's answer to the charge of forgetting his own people. *Yahweh* asks in the opening verse:

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Lord God has given me

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

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

It is well for us to remember frequently the sufferings of Jesus, the sheer physical agony that he went through. Think of the Upper Room and the Last Supper when he said his soul was "exceeding sorrowful unto death" {Mark 14:34 KJV}; the shadows of Gethsemane among the olive trees; his loneliness, his prayers, his disappointment with his disciples; his bloody sweat, the traitor's kiss, the binding, the blow in the face; the spitting, the scourging, the buffeting, the mocking, the crown of thorns, the smiting; the sorrowful way and the burdensome cross he had to bear. Think of his exhaustion, his collapse, the stripping of his garments, the impaling on the cross, the jeers of his foes and the flight of his friends; the hours on the cross, the darkness, his being forsaken of God, the terrible cry of anguish, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" {Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34 KJV}. And then the end at last, "It is finished" {John 19:30}. This is all seen in anticipation by the prophet and was all fulfilled in Jesus.

But that is not the end. It is well to remember what the book of Hebrews says, "We have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities," {Heb 4:15a KJV}. He has been through it all. "He was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin," {Heb 4:15b KJV}.

The chapter closes with a word of warning and a word of encouragement. First the word of encouragement:

**Who among you fears the Lord
and obeys the voice of his servant,
who walks in darkness
and has no light.
yet trusts in the name of the Lord
and relies upon his God. {Isa 50:10 RSV}**

That is the word for all who feel forsaken. God cannot and will not leave you. He will deliver you.

But what about those who do not trust him, those who insist on trying to work it out their own way?

**Behold, all you who kindle a fire,
who set brands alight!
Walk by the light of your fire,
and by the brands which you have kindled!
This shall you have from my hand:
you shall lie down in torment. {Isa 50:11 RSV}**

That is not spoken as a vengeful God, but it is a realist speaking. He is saying, "If you turn to something else,

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

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

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

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

When you are discouraged, look back. You may not be what you want to be, or even what you ought to be, but thank God you are not what you were! Remember Paul's words to the Corinthian believers, ". . . neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God," {1 Cor 6:9b-10 RSV}. But the apostle continues, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God," {1 Cor 6:11 RSV}. Look back. Has God changed you? Has he altered your inner life and changed your heart? In the words of the old hymn,

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

Then also look ahead, God says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In response to this, Israel cries out with desire to see this happen immediately.

**"Awake, awake, put on strength,
O arm of the Lord [that is, the Messiah];
awake, as in days of old,
the generations of long ago.
Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab [Egypt] in pieces,
that didst pierce the dragon [Pharaoh, king of Egypt]?
Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea,
the waters of the great deep;
that didst make the depths of the sea a way
for the redeemed to pass over?
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. {Isa 51:9-11 RSV}**

Don't you feel this way at times? Don't you want to say, "Lord, I've had it here. Come soon." That is how the Bible ends: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." But God says we must wait, but he will not leave us comfortless during the waiting.

**"I, I am he that comforts you;
who are you that you are afraid of man who dies,
of the son of man who is made like grass,
and have forgotten the Lord, your Maker,
who stretched out the heavens
and laid the foundations of the earth,
and fear continually all the day**

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

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

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

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

He calls then to Israel to awaken itself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prayer:

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

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

MAN OF SORROWS

by Ray C. Stedman

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

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

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

God himself announcing the presence of the Servant.

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

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

First, in the words, "He shall be exalted," there is a reference to the resurrection. Jesus was brought back from the dead, stepping into a condition of life that no man had ever entered before. Lazarus had been resurrected, in a sense, but he merely returned to this earthly life. Jesus, however, became the "firstborn from the dead," {Col 1:18}. He was thus exalted to a higher dimension of existence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The next stanza portrays our Lord's substitutionary sacrifice:

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

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

This, of course, is the very heart of the gospel, the good news. Jesus took our place. As Peter puts it, "He bore our sins in his own body upon the tree," {cf, 1 Pet 2:24}. He took our sins and paid the price for them. He had no sins of his own and Scripture is very careful to record the sinlessness of Jesus himself. He was not suffering for his own transgressions, but for the sins of others. One writer has put it rather well,

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

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

Sin is a disease that has afflicted our entire race. We cannot understand the depth of human depravity until we see the awful agony through which our Lord passed; behold the hours of darkness and hear the terrible orphaned cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" {Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34 KJV}. All this spells out for us what we really are like. Most think of ourselves as decent people, good people. We have not done, perhaps, some of the terrible things that others have done. But when we see in the cross of Jesus the depth of evil in our hearts we understand that sin is a disease that has infiltrated our whole lives. Man, who was created in the image of God and once wore the glory of his manhood, has become bruised and marred, sick and broken, his conscience ruined, his understanding faulty, his will enfeebled. The principle of integrity and the resolve to do right has been completely undermined in all of us. We know this to be true. No wonder, then, this verse comes as the best of news: He was wounded for our transgressions. The bruising that he felt was the chastisement that we deserved, but it was laid upon him.

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

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

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

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

The next stanza foretells the silent sufferings of Jesus.

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

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

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

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

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

But when at last the deed was done and he cried with a loud voice, "It is finished" {John 19:30}, his friends came to take him down from the cross. No enemy hands touched his body after his death, only those who loved him. As they removed his bloody body, the dear lips were silent, the wondrous voice was stilled, the light had gone from his eyes, and the great heart beat no more. But instead of throwing him on a rubbish heap, as the authorities intended, they "made his grave with the rich," just as Isaiah had predicted written 720 years before the event. Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, offered to put the body of Jesus in his new tomb that had never been used. Someone has put that rather remarkably, "He who came from a virgin womb, must be laid in a virgin tomb."

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

strong; because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

The Hebrew in Verse 10 is rather remarkable. Our version says, "It was the will of the Lord to bruise him," but the Hebrew literally says, "It pleased Jehovah to bruise him. He has put him to grief." The question comes, "How could it please God to put his Son to death, in the agony and torture of a crucifixion?" How could God find any pleasure in that?

When the question is asked, "Who is responsible for the death of Jesus?" the world rather blatantly answers, "It was the Jews who put him to death." That is true. The Jewish rulers did deliver him up to be crucified. But it is also true that the Gentiles crucified Jesus. Pilate, as the representative of the supreme government of earth at that time, put him to death, so that both Jew and Gentile are responsible. But that still does not exhaust the matter. We must go beyond that to this mysterious statement, "It pleased Jehovah to bruise him. He has put him to grief." When we face the question of why and how could God the Father ever take any delight in the death of his beloved Son, the only clue we have is that remarkable promise in Verse 32 of Romans 8, "He who spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all, for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" As hard as it is to believe, we must understand that God loved the lost race of mankind more than he loved his Son, and was willing to deliver him up to death that our race may find a way out of the disease and death of sin. That is all we can say on that. Perhaps one of the hymns puts it best,

On Christ almighty vengeance fell,
That would have sunk a world to hell.
He bore it for a chosen race,
And thus becomes our Hiding Place.

Verses 10 and 11 describe a resurrection, and the satisfaction that Messiah feels when he sees what his sufferings have accomplished. We are told, "He shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days." That cannot be said of any human being who dies. How can a dead man see his offspring? How can a dead man prolong his days? But clearly, after death, after he has "made his grave with the wicked," here is One who shall "see his offspring and prolong his days." Resurrection is clearly in view.

"He shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied." What a remarkable statement! Nothing else could satisfy Jesus than to see the redeemed brought to his Father. Nothing else could do it. This was the relentless desire that drove him through pain, tears and death-hell itself-to achieve what he always wanted: a world freed from pain, torment, death and injustice; a world of men delivered from crying, sorrow, sadness and heartache; a world in which men and women would live in peace and in power, fulfilling the tremendous possibilities that God incorporated in man when he made him in the beginning. This is what he is after, and nothing can satisfy him but that. As the writer of Hebrews says, "For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, despising the shame thereof," {cf, Heb 12:2}. This will at last bring satisfaction to his heart.

Verse 12 summarizes all this: "He will make many righteous and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great and he shall divide the spoil with the strong." This is a reference to Paul's word in Romans 8, that we are "heirs with Christ" {Rom 8:17}, and that we will share with him the inheritance that he has achieved. It is for those who "out of weakness have been made strong" {Heb 11:34} by faith in his death and life. So the chapter ends, "Because he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

When I first came here as a pastor, many years ago, we had an unusual opportunity to have in our home a Japanese man who had become a Christian evangelist. His name was Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, the commander of the squadron that bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. He told us in his broken English of that event and how he felt at the time he gave the command to drop the bombs. After the war he became a hero in Japan, yet he felt his life was empty. Then he heard the amazing story of one of the American fliers, Jacob DeShazer, one of Doolittle's bombers, who had been captured and put in prison in Japan. At first he was a very intractable prisoner, but someone gave him a New Testament and, reading it, his whole life was changed.

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

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

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

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

THE TIME OF RAIN AND SNOW

by Ray C. Stedman

The title of our study, *The Time of Rain and Snow*, is taken from the oft-quoted passage found in Chapter 55 of Isaiah:

**"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and return not thither but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it." {Isa 55:10-11 RSV}**

We could not have chosen a better week for this study for rain and snow have been the featured elements of our weather in Northern California in the past week and the topic of most of our conversation. It will be interesting to see what the weather will be like when we come to the chapters on fire and judgment!

Chapter 54, where we actually begin our study, is linked closely with the amazing 53rd chapter, which pictures the Lamb of God offering himself for the sins of man. Chapter 54 opens with a summons to Israel to sing and rejoice because of the fruitfulness that will follow redemption. Chapter 55 then speaks of the rain and the snow which come upon the earth to bring forth that harvest of fruitfulness. But first the call to gladness:

**"Sing, O barren one, who did not bear;
break forth into singing and cry aloud,
you who have not been in travail!
For the children of the desolate one will be more**

**than the children of her that is married, says the Lord.
Enlarge the place of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;
hold not back, lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes.
For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left,
and your descendants will possess the nations
and will people the desolate cities." {Isa 54:1-3 RSV}**

These are words of hope and a guarantee of fruitfulness to the nation Israel, yet to be fulfilled in the day when they see and recognize their Messiah. Yet, as we have seen many times through this great prophecy, these words are also applicable to those who are members of the family of God today. We find they are fulfilled to us in a spiritual sense, not literally, as they will be to Israel. They picture the joy and gladness of a heart that has been set free by Jesus. Many of you, if you had opportunity, could bear a ringing witness to the joy and peace that flooded your heart when you came to know the Lord. Years ago at a church in Denver where I was attending, there was a woman who came to Christ, after having burned herself out in the ways of the world. Her heart was flooded with joy, but she did not know how to express it in a Christian way. She did not know words like "Hallelujah," or "Praise the Lord," so she would just stand and say, "Whoopie!" This passage reflects that glad sense of rejoicing.

It goes on to describe in specific detail the freedom that Christ brings into a life. First, from fear and guilt:

**"Fear not, for you will not be ashamed;
be not confounded, for you will not be put to shame;
for you will forget the shame of your youth,
and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more." {Isa 54:4 RSV}**

That is one of the great things about salvation. We can forget the things that are in the past because a change has occurred. We are forgiven and restored.

Verses 5 and 6 speak of the companionship and the comfort of a relationship with the Lord.

**"For your Maker is your husband,
the Lord of hosts is his name;
and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
the God of the whole earth he is called.
For the Lord has called you
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
like a wife of youth when she is cast off,
says your God." {Isa 54:5-6 RSV}**

These are words of sweet comfort to those who have been bereaved, or those who have felt abandoned. Your Maker will be like a husband to a lonely widow.

Verses 7 and 8 are words of compassion and mercy:

**"For a brief moment I forsook you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the Lord, your Redeemer." {Isa 54:7-8 RSV}**

In their literal fulfillment, these words speak of the years of wandering for the nation of Israel. In the Lord's sight this is but a brief moment in which he has hid his face, and it will be over soon. But to those of us who know Christ, this speaks of that time when we thought God had no concern for us and we saw him as a distant, angry God, hiding himself from us. But now the promise is to show unbroken and everlasting love to us. Then the next two verses speak of the security one will feel in this relationship. God vows that there shall

be no change in his attitude toward us.

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

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

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

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

What a beautiful invitation! The appeal, of course, is to any who thirst. We humans are so made that our souls thirst just as much as our bodies do. We thirst to lay hold of life. I have never met anybody who does not want to live, to be fulfilled and satisfied with life. This is what we are invited to satisfy. "Come to the water." We recall Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well of Samaria, and her pitiful attempt to find satisfaction in one marriage after another. Jesus said to her, "If you knew who it is that speaks to you, you would ask of me and I would put in you a well of water, springing up unto everlasting life," {cf, John 4:10-14}. She asked for it and he gave it to her. That is the same invitation we have here. And not only to drink water, but wine, the wine of joy; and milk, the milk of the Word, to feed the new life. Those of us who have drunk of this well, of this wine and this milk, know how true these figures are. There is where peace, inner calmness, joy and satisfaction of life are to be found.

The Lord then has a question for those who hesitate to come and drink.

**"Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" {Isa 55:2a RSV}**

That is a highly relevant question today. What are you working for?, God asks. What are you getting out of all you are doing? You may be hard pressed to answer that. Have you ever asked yourself, why do I get up in the morning, go to work, work all day, then come home, go to sleep, only to get up in the morning and go to work again? What is it all about? What am I working for? That is the question asked here. Why do you do all that? "To earn money," you say. Why? "To buy food for myself and my word be." Why do you need food? "To get strength." Why? "So I can go to work and earn money!" No wonder life is often described as a squirrel cage, where you endlessly run around in circles, or a rat race, without meaning. This is the question many are asking today.

A certain television commercial that is frequently aired pictures a young man out in his yard planting trees. As he is doing so, he is talking about all the busy things that occupy his life, and how he is putting money into a certain investment savings plan so that, as he puts it, "the day will come when I can quit all this work and relax." He touches one of the young trees and says, "By that time these guys ought to be big enough to hold a hammock." Every time I see that I think, "What a futile end to live for! How long will he stay in the

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

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

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

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

Where is the life we have lost in living?

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

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

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

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

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

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

The text goes on to say:

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

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

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

A long-term friend of mine who grew up in this church, Brad Curl, dropped by a meeting of our interns at our house yesterday and I had him share what he is doing. Brad is an artist who lives in Washington, DC., where he has an art gallery. Some years ago the Lord laid on him a deep concern about what pornography was doing to our nation, especially to our youth. Under God's direction he took on the Playboy empire, seeking to reveal the whole truth about the way pornography dehumanizes people, degrades them, by planting filth into their minds that takes root and produces some of the terrible crimes we are so disturbed about today. He is a David that has taken on a Goliath. Already 40% of the advertisers in Playboy magazine have voluntarily withdrawn their advertising because of his campaign. The Playboy empire is financially shaken by this kind of a grassroots approach. Yet he told us of the many times he has felt so alone, and cast upon God. He has had to mortgage his house several times to pay bills. But God has used him in abundant ways and is calling attention to people all over the land of the terrible evil that pornography does in our midst. That is the way God works. One man, with God, can make a difference.

Verses 10 and 11, quoted at the beginning of our study, give an example from nature of the way God works. The rain and the snow come down from heaven; man has no control over it. We have learned very little about how to encourage rainfall when we have need of it, or decrease it when we have too much of it. It comes at God's will, it soaks into the ground and seems to disappear, with apparently limited effect. It may even cause some problems. But it will do its work, quietly and silently. God adds, "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth." Like rain and snow, it falls upon human hearts, takes root and begins to produce fruit.

Here in Northern California, in just a week or so, the hills will be covered with a marvelous, refreshing green. Soon the grain will be standing waist high in the fields. That is the way God's Word works. Next week I will be in Anaheim for the opening of the Congress on Biblical Exposition. We are trying to encourage pastors to catch on afresh to the remarkable power of this Book; what it can do when it touches human hearts, how life springs everywhere here the Word of God is preached. The great tragedy of the church today is the neglect of the Scriptures. People no longer know what the Bible teaches. They no longer think biblically, to think the thoughts of God after him. This is what this passage encourages us to remember.

A beautiful description of this harvest follows in the closing verses of this chapter.

**"For you shall go out in joy,
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign which shall not be cut off." {Isa 55:12-13 RSV}**

Do you understand the import of those verses? God is saying, "That which has caused pain to you shall be turned into blessing; in its place shall grow up beauty and love." I have seen this happen in many lives. Some people have the thorn of cynicism and sarcasm growing in them, but let them be touched by the Word of God and soon the graceful fir of patience and understanding grows in its place. Some harbor the brier of malice and envy, but let them be touched with the Word, the rain and the snow from heaven, and there will grow up in its place the delicate myrtle of compassion and kindness. Dr. F. B. Meyer has commented on this passage:

There are briars besetting every path that call for earnest care. Many beside Paul have thorns in the flesh. But His grace is sufficient to change our biggest curse into our greatest blessing. Look for this! Ask God to transform the conditions of your life, which has cost you excruciating anguish, into sources of benediction.

Is this not the promise of Jesus to his disciples in the Upper Room? "Your sorrow shall be turned into joy," {John 16:20 KJV}

Chapter 56 continues this thought, with a special word to strangers and single people. Verse 3:

**Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,
"The Lord will surely separate me from his people" [Do not say, "Because I am new and
have never been here before I am not going to be able to participate in all the blessing that
these folks have."];
and let not the eunuch [the unmarried] say,
'Behold, I am a dry tree.'
For thus says the Lord:
"To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off. {Isa 56:3-5 RSV}**

What a marvelous promise! We must understand that the word about "keeping the sabbath" here has no reference to Sunday. Sunday is not the "sabbath," and it never has been. It was a mistake for Christians in past generations to ever call it that. Saturday is the Sabbath, but even that is only a shadow, a picture, not the real thing. Keeping Saturday as a special day is not what God ultimately intended. That was merely a means of teaching the truth that he wants known. The explanation of the sabbath is given most clearly in Hebrews 4. There we are told that sabbath means rest. We read in Genesis that God "rested" on the seventh day. It is rest that is the fundamental idea, a rest from human effort in expectation that God is going to work. That is what it means. Thus, when you expect God to be at work in your life, you are keeping the sabbath as God wants it to be kept. Having done all you can do, you confidently anticipate that he is going to do something more and let it rest with God -- that is keeping the sabbath as God intended it to be kept. Thus Hebrews 4 says, "There remains (is now present) a rest unto the people of God," {cf, Heb 4:9}. That rest is described in Verse 10 of that chapter, "Whoever enters God's rest has ceased from his own labors, as God did from his." He has kept the sabbath, and, as this passage promises, has gained an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

Chapter 57 returns to the theme of idolatry and to the disobedience of the nation of Israel, to their surrender to the awful culture around them in Isaiah's day, when they even offered their children to the god Molech. We experience this in our own day for this is what pornography does. It is a way of offering our children up to a false and destructive god. The child abuse that we are so horrified at today is a direct result of the flood of pornographic literature, videos and movies throughout our land.

In the midst of this debauchery, God asks another searching question.

**Whom did you dread and fear,
so that you lied,
and did not remember me,
did not give me a thought?
Have I not held my peace,
even for a long time,
and so you do not fear me? {Isa 57:11 RSV}**

God's patience with evil is often misunderstood. People begin to think that if there is a God at all, he does not care what they do. They go on their way, responding out of fear, perhaps, out of rejection, or of alienation from society. They surrender to the allurements of the world and forget God. God asks, "What are you afraid of? Why do you do that? Have you misunderstood? Because I held my peace have you lost your fear of me?" Yet there will be terrible consequences of evil.

Once again this passage stresses the danger of self-confidence and pride.

For thus says the high and lofty One

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

The danger to man is always of pride and self-confidence. "I can do it all my self. I am in charge of my own life. I do not need anyone." But God says that is the heart that is in trouble. He dwells with those who are of a "humble and contrite" heart. Here is a beautiful picture of God himself, living within someone and strengthening him.

The opposite is also true. The closing verses of the chapter describe the price of pride: inner restlessness and lack of peace.

**"Peace, peace, to the far and to the near, says the Lord;
and I will heal him.
But the wicked are like the tossing sea;
for it cannot rest,
and its waters toss up mire and dirt.
There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked." {Isa 57:19-21 RSV}**

Do not think of the "wicked" as gangsters and blatant sinners. A man may rob a bank of a million dollars. That is wicked. But if a child steals a nickel from his mother's purse, that, too, is wicked. To such, there is "no peace." Proverbs says, "Be sure your sin will find you out," {Num 32:23}. It does not say, "You sin will be found out." It will find you out. You will not rest. You will be troubled within, feeling guilty, having to hide your sin from people.

Chapter 58 voices a protest from the religious community. Some people say, "We don't fit into this category. We're good, decent people. We go to church. We love the Bible. We give liberally. Yet God does not seem to give us joy and gladness. Why is this?" Thus Verse 3 of Chapter 58 protests,

**'Why have we fasted, and thou seest it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and thou takest no knowledge of it?' {Isa 58:3 RSV}**

The cry comes from those who rely on external religious practices. God answers,

**"Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,
and oppress all your workers.
Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with wicked fist.
Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a rush,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? [This is a sarcastic description of religious
worship.]
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the Lord?**

**"Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,**

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

That is what God is really looking for. All through the Scriptures the emphasis is on the need for reality inside, not mere outward conformity to ritual and custom. According to the Bible, the ultimate test of faith has always been: does it lead you to serve, to help somebody in need? Do you feel motivated to act? If you do, your faith is real. Otherwise, as James says, it is a "dead faith." One Christian has put his experience in these words,

I knelt to pray when work was done and prayed, "O God, bless everyone... Lift from each burdened heart the pain and let the sick be well again." ... And then I woke another day and carelessly went on my way... And all day long I did not try to wipe the tear from any eye... I did not try to bear the load of any brother on the road... I did not even go to see the sick man just next door to me.

And then again when day was done, I prayed, "O God, bless everyone" ... And as I prayed into my ear there came a voice which whispered clear ... "Whom have you tried to bless today? Pause, hypocrite, before you pray ... God's richest blessings always go by hands that serve Him, here below." ... And then I hid my face and cried, "Forgive me, Lord, for I have lied... Let me but see another day, for I would live the way I pray."

Someone else has added, "Think not in prayer to fold thy hands. Forgetful of the Lord's commands, from duty's claims no life is free. Behold! The Lord hath need of thee."

God's promise comes immediately to one who takes note of this. Verse 8:

**Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am.
"If you take away from the midst of you the yoke,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
And the Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your desire with good things,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters fail not." {Isa 58:8-11 RSV}**

Such vivid imagery hardly needs exposition.

James says, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction," {Jas 1:27 KJV}. Someone has written of this,

Pure religion prompts you
To give Dad a more welcome greeting
when he comes home than the dog.
To know if the postman's wife is sick.
To put the hymnals back in the rack
to save the janitor work.
To speak kindly to your younger brother.
To iron the dress for your sister.
To listen to the troubles of another.
To give away not the unwanted dress
but the one you might wear again.
To remind the Sunday school superintendent
that Mrs. Smith might like to teach.

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

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

Prayer:

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

Title: The Time of Rain and Snow
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 54-58
Message No: 12
Catalog No: 587
Date: February 23, 1986

AND THEN COMES THE END

by Ray C. Stedman

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

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

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

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

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

Their feet run to evil,

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

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

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

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

That eloquently confirms what Isaiah declares.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**and we know our iniquities:
transgressing, and denying the Lord,
and turning away from following our God,
speaking oppression and revolt,
conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words. {Isa 59:11-13 RSV}**

That is the real problem. But what an honest confession is here, a full acknowledgment that the problem is with you and me -- not God!

There is an immediate divine response to that confession:

**The Lord saw it, and it displeased him
that there was no justice.
He saw that there was no man,
and wondered that there was no one intervene;
then his own arm brought him victory,
and his righteousness upheld him.
He put on righteousness as a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation upon his head;
he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
and wrapped himself in fury as a mantle. {Isa 59:15b-17}**

This is looking on to the day, described in the book of Revelation and other places, when God will begin to judge evil in human hearts. God acts immediately to this end. And he will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the Lord.

This is the second return of Jesus, when he comes to Israel to deliver them from their evil. As Israel's Redeemer, he comes to Zion (Jerusalem) to begin his restorative work. Chapter 60 is another glowing description of the blessing of Israel after its restoration. This is a beautiful account of what prophecy students call the "millennium," the thousand years of blessing that follows the restoration of Israel to its God. It begins with a summons to the nation to stand up and rejoice in its deliverance.

**Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.
And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising. {Isa 60:1-3 RSV}**

I hope you will read for yourself this beautiful poetic description of millennial blessings, when Israel will be the head of the nations. The chapter closes with language very reminiscent of the book of Revelation.

**Your sun shall no more go down,
nor your moon withdraw itself;
for the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your days of mourning shall be ended.
Your people shall all be righteous;
they shall possess the land for ever,
the shoot of my planting, the work of my hands,
that I might be glorified.
The least one shall become a clan,
and the smallest one a mighty nation;
I am the Lord;
and in its time I will hasten it. {Isa 60:20-22 RSV}**

All of God's promises to Israel will be fulfilled to the letter. These great passages in Isaiah look forward to that

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

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

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

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

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

This is the answer to the question people are asking, "Why doesn't God do something?" The answer is, because he is giving people everywhere a chance! When he starts judging, he will judge the whole world -- everybody in it, without exception. Only those who have already bowed to his will will escape the penalty of that judgment. Then he will begin "the day of vengeance of our God," the phrase Jesus did not read that day in the synagogue. This comma has been called "the longest comma in history." "The year of the Lord's favor" now covers almost two thousand years of time, but it will be followed by "the day of vengeance of our God."

Notice the contrast between "the year of his grace," and "the day of vengeance." God does not like vengeance. He does not delight in judgment. Isaiah calls it "his strange work." But it must be done eventually, though it will be kept as brief as possible. This is what prophecy records as "the time of the end."

The rest of the chapter and all of Chapter 62 go on again to describe the restoration of Israel. All of this applies to us spiritually, as a description of our permanent relationship with God and describing the security of the believer. Hear Verses 3-4 of Chapter 62:

**You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
but you shall be called *My delight is in her*
and your land *Married*;
for the Lord delights in you,
and your land shall be married. {Isa 62:3-4 RSV}**

Those are specific promises to Israel that have spiritual application to us. The last verse of Chapter 62 speaks

to this as well:

**They shall be called *The holy people*,
The redeemed of the Lord;
and you shall be called *Sought out*,
a city not forsaken. {Isa 62:12 RSV}**

This is to be the ultimate fate of Jerusalem, but describes our status in the eyes of our Lord. We are "accepted in the Beloved," {Eph 1:6 KJV}.

Chapter 63 is another picture of the judgment of God. It portrays the Messiah coming to Jerusalem from the south and entering into a dialogue with the believers there. He comes from Edom, in the Negeb, with blood-soaked garments. Those who see him coming ask,

**Who is this that comes from Edom,
in crimsoned garments from Bozrah,
he that is glorious in his apparel,
marching in the greatness of his strength? {Isa 63:1a RSV}**

Jesus answers,

**"It is I, announcing vindication,
mighty to save" {Isa 63:1b RSV}**

They respond,

**Why is thy apparel red,
and thy garments like his that treads in the wine press? {Isa 63:2 RSV}**

His answer comes,

**"I have trodden the wine press alone,
and from the peoples no one was with me;
I trod them in my anger
and trampled them in my wrath;
their lifeblood is sprinkled upon my garments,
and I have stained all my raiment.
For the day of vengeance was in my heart,
and my year of redemption has come." {Isa 63:3-4 RSV}**

The parallel to this is found in Chapter 14 of the book of Revelation, where the apostle sees an angel coming out from heaven, having a great sickle in his hand,

Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has power over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who has the sharp sickle, "Put in your sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." So the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God, and the wine press was trodden outside the city and blood flowed from the wine press as high as a horse's bridle for one thousand six hundred stadia. {Rev 14:18-20 RSV}

That measurement is about two hundred miles -- which is the distance from Lebanon in the north down to Edom in the south of Israel. The whole land will be covered with blood from the great battle of Armageddon, the warfare that ends the struggles of earth, as depicted in other Scriptures. This is a terrible picture of the treading of the wine press. The "harvest" always deals with Gentiles, while the "wine press" is always a picture of God's judgment of Israel. This will be "the time of Jacob's trouble" which Jeremiah mentions.

Chapter 64 is the response of the remnant of Israel, the believing Jews, to this. Their cry is a prayer,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**I spread out my hands all the day
to a rebellious people,
who walk in a way that is not good,
following their own devices;
a people who provoke me
to my face continually, {Isa 65:2-3a RSV}**

They are idolaters, following other gods. That is what is wrong with them. More than that,

**who say, "Keep to yourself,
do not come near me, for I am set apart from you." {Isa 65:5a RSV}**

Literally, the words are, "I am holier than thou." This is where that phrase comes from. If there is any sin in the Bible that is categorized as being worse than any other sin, it is the sin of self-righteousness! That is the sin of Israel. It is also the sin of the church. Like the Pharisees, we often draw our garments around ourselves, crying, "We would never do that!" Remember that the hardest words of Jesus were uttered against the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. Not one of us knows what we would do, given certain circumstances, if we thought we could get away with it or everybody else was doing it. That is the terrible evil of the human heart.

But after the time of God's judgment of Israel, God will fulfill all his promises. Once again we have described here the beautiful conditions of the millennium, beginning with the promise ultimately of a new heaven and a new earth:

For behold, I create new heavens

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

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

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

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

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

The final chapter continues the dialogue between Jehovah and Israel. The fascinating thing about this chapter is that it is a direct reply to the yearning on the part of many in Israel today to rebuild the temple upon Mount Moriah. As you know, some of us have had a very close association with the Jews who are committed to rebuilding a temple upon that mount. They are determined to do this and they are working every way they can to accomplish it. But God has a word for them, which we find in the opening words of this chapter,

Thus says the Lord:
"Heaven is my throne
and the earth is my footstool;
what is the house which you would build for me,
and what is the place of my rest?
All these things my hand has made,
and so all these things are mine, says the Lord.
But this is the man to whom I will look,
he that is humble and contrite in spirit,
and trembles at my word." {Isa 66:1-2 RSV}

It is not that the temple will not be built. It will be. And animal sacrifices will once again be offered in it as they were offered in the days of our Lord. But God is saying that these are all worthless if he is not enshrined in the heart. He goes on to describe in scathing language what animal sacrifices will mean without that heart worship.

"He who slaughters an ox is like him who kills a man;
he who sacrifices a lamb, like him who breaks a dog's neck;
he who presents a cereal offering,

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

We have seen all through this book how God hates phony religion. He hates outward ritual that has no inner reality! This will be true of those days as well.

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

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

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

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

What is this all about? The most amazing thing that has happened in human history is that Israel produced a son, Jesus, before she travailed in labor. The great tribulation and the judgment of Israel described here is as a woman in labor, and yet Israel will come to the realization that nineteen hundred years before she entered into her labor, she had already had a son! This is the great wonder of the age. God declares that people will say, "Who has ever heard such a thing, that a nation then 'shall be born in a day.'" When Jesus returns, and the nation sees who it is, those will believe in him will be made righteous and they shall flood the earth with the knowledge of God. Israel shall be God's witnesses in that day.

The closing verses are a final description of the restoration of that nation, and promise anew of the new heavens and the new earth still to come:

"For as the new heavens and the new earth
which I will make
shall remain before me, says the Lord;
so shall your descendants and your name remain.
>From new moon to new moon,
and from sabbath to sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,"
says the Lord. {Isa 66:22-23 RSV}

This is a millennial scene. Even during those times when all the nations, led by Israel, shall come up to Jerusalem to worship, God will have provided a memorial for them, reminding them of the cost of disobedience and the terrible fate of unbelief.

"They shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh." {Isa 66:24 RSV}

So the great prophecy comes to an end. We are left with the question, "Do we truly know this loving, patient God, terrible in his justice, awful in his might and power, yet so earnestly loving in his attempt to bring men to himself?"

That is the great question. The name Isaiah means "Jehovah saves." That is what God wants. This great prophecy is a testimony to the fact that, "God is not willing that any should perish, but that all men should come to the knowledge of repentance," {cf, 2 Pet 3:9}.

Let me close with these words from C.S. Lewis,

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that, and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison, you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for this honest and searching book. How beautifully it describes the program of history, much of which still lies unfulfilled before us; yet how marvelously we see you there, and begin to understand the majesty and the mercy of your Being. Help us to adjust our lives accordingly, to come humbly and contritely before you to obtain the mercy we so desperately need. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Title: And then Comes the End
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Isaiah: A Short Series
Scripture: Isaiah 59-66
Message No: 13
Catalog No: 588
Date: March 2, 1986

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