

STUDIES IN ISAIAH

by Robert C. Walton

STUDIES IN ISAIAH I

Introduction and Background

Today we begin a series of studies taken from the book of the prophet Isaiah. Since the book of Isaiah is the third longest in the Bible, behind Jeremiah and Psalms, we certainly will not be able to cover it in any acceptable fashion in twelve weeks. Consequently, we will instead look at excerpts from the book, concentrating on passages of particular significance for the ministry of Isaiah, of direct relevance to the life and work of the Messiah, or of special importance for our understanding of the Gospel. Today, however, we will lay the groundwork for our study by looking at background information that will help us understand the book of Isaiah more easily.

THE LIFE OF ISAIAH

Isaiah tells us in the first verse of his prophecy that he proclaimed the Word of God during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah in Judah. Since he received his prophetic call in the year of Uzziah's death, we can place the beginning of his ministry in 740 BC. According to Jewish tradition, the great prophet was murdered by being sawn in two during the reign of Hezekiah's wicked son Manasseh (cf. Hebrews 11:37), which would place his death around 685 BC, meaning that Isaiah's prophetic ministry extended over a period of about 55 years. Hosea (Israel) and Micah (Judah) were his contemporaries among the writing prophets.

We know little about Isaiah's personal life. He was the son of Amoz, about whom we know nothing, though some have concluded that he must have come from an aristocratic family because of the easy access he gained to the throne rooms of the kings during whose reigns he ministered. In any case, he was clearly a court prophet, carrying on his ministry entirely in Jerusalem and its environs. His writings contain some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible and are of a consistently high literary quality.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The years of Isaiah's prophetic ministry were very eventful ones in the history of God's people. Prior to the beginning of his ministry, both Israel and Judah had experienced decades of relative peace and prosperity. The two most powerful kingdoms in the Near East at the time were Egypt and Assyria; the former was going through a period of weakness and dynastic confusion, while the latter was occupied elsewhere and generally left the Mediterranean nations alone.

In 745 BC, however, a new king came to the throne of Assyria - Tiglath-Pileser III, an aggressive empire-builder. Fearing what the new king might do, the rulers of Israel and Syria formed an alliance against him and attempted to draw Judah into their orbit, threatening invasion if Judah refused. This threatened invasion formed the first major crisis of Isaiah's ministry and provided the context for the prophecy of the Virgin Birth in chapter 7, as we will see in a few weeks. Ahaz, against the explicit advice of Isaiah, sought an alliance with Assyria in order to stave off the threatened attack. Tiglath-Pileser readily agreed, sent his army westward, and subjugated the rebel states in 732 BC, leaving the Northern Kingdom of Israel to be ruled by Hoshea, who was virtually an Assyrian puppet. Ten years later, the Assyrian king Sargon conquered Israel, reduced Samaria to rubble, and deported the population to the northern frontiers of the Assyrian empire. Because

Isaiah prophesied in Jerusalem, however, this incident receives no significant mention in his writings.

The second major crisis of Isaiah's ministry came in the year 701 BC. The Assyrian king was now Sennacherib, and he again turned his attention westward. Again contrary to Isaiah's advice, Hezekiah, now the king of Judah, sought an alliance with Egypt against the Assyrian menace. Assyria proceeded to invade, looting and burning dozens of towns in Judah in the process, then laying siege to Jerusalem. This time, however, Hezekiah trusted the Lord as Isaiah said he should do, and the armies of Sennacherib were miraculously destroyed (this story makes up the only significant narrative portion of the book of Isaiah - chapters 36-39).

The epilogue to the story of the failed Assyrian invasion speaks of Hezekiah inviting representatives from Babylon to visit Jerusalem and view his treasure houses. This foolish action sets the stage for the Babylonian Captivity a century later, and serves as the transition point in the structure of the book of Isaiah.

AUTHORSHIP

The authorship of the book of Isaiah should not need to be a matter of discussion. The first verse of the book clearly indicates the author as being Isaiah the son of Amoz - a fact that is confirmed frequently in the writings of the New Testament. For the last two centuries, however, critics have insisted that the book must have had two, if not three, authors. Why would they say such a thing, other than the reflexive tendency of critics to doubt the veracity of even the clearest statements of Scripture? There are two main issues that fuel the skepticism of the critics.

The first of these is the obvious difference between the first section of the book (chapters 1-39) and the latter section (chapters 40-66). The former chapters focus on events during the last half of the eighth century BC, and the Assyrian Empire plays a prominent role in both the history and the prophecies found in this section. The latter portion of the book, however, is written to people in exile in Babylon almost two centuries later, and Babylon, for obvious reasons, plays a significant role in the subject matter. Other scholars point to differences in style between the two parts of the book as indicating the pen of a different author, but such conclusions tend to be highly subjective; at least as many similarities in style exist as differences.

The second problem really gets to the heart of the issue, however. Critics insist on a different author (or authors) for the last twenty-seven chapters of Isaiah primarily because of two verses - Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1. In these verses, the Persian king Cyrus is mentioned by name. Critics, of course, deny the possibility of predictive prophecy, thus must by definition assign these verses to an author who lived during or after the reign of Cyrus, who delivered Judah from captivity in Babylon around 535 BC. Thus the myth of "Second Isaiah" or "Deutero-Isaiah" is fueled primarily by a denial of the inspiration and authority of God's Word and is bolstered with speculative arguments that have relatively simple alternative explanations.

For example, Isaiah's concern with the holiness and faithfulness of God and His role as the sovereign ruler of the nations should lead us to expect that, in the same way that the refusal of Ahaz to trust the Lord instead of seeking an alliance with Assyria led to God's judgment, which was

predicted by Isaiah before it occurred, so the disobedience of Hezekiah in revealing his treasures to the Babylonian ambassadors would lead to God's judgment in the form of captivity at the hands of the Babylonians. But because God is not only the judge of His people, but also the deliverer of His people, Isaiah could give comfort to the generation in captivity, pointing them not only toward God's intention to free them from the yoke of Babylon, but to send a greater Deliverer, the Suffering Servant. Thus, in the same way that Ahaz's disobedience in chapter 7 sets the stage for the judgment and ultimate deliverance narrated in chapters 1-38, so the disobedience of Hezekiah in chapter 39 sets the stage for the judgment (presupposed) and deliverance narrated in chapters 40-66.

For believers, of course, the mention of Cyrus by name is not a problem - no more so than the mention of Josiah by name in I Kings 13:2 or the naming of Immanuel in Isaiah 7:14. Further evidence comes from the fact that two pre-exilic prophets allude to verses in "Second Isaiah" in their writings (Zephaniah 2:15 alludes to Isaiah 47:8-11 and Nahum 1:15 quotes Isaiah 52:7). The testimony of Jesus Himself is conclusive when he combines quotations from Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 53 in John 12:38-40, ascribing them both to the same author.

STRUCTURE

If Isaiah is the Gospel of the Old Testament, it should not surprise us that its structure bears a certain similarity to that of the book of Romans in that its primary movement is from sin to salvation. The first thirty-nine chapters deal primarily with judgment - chapters 1-5 with the sins of Judah and Israel, chapter 6 with Isaiah's call to prophetic ministry, chapters 7-12 with Ahaz's sin and its consequences, chapters 13-35 with God's promised judgment against Israel, Judah, and the surrounding nations, and chapters 36-39 with the historical narrative of Sennacherib's invasion, God's miraculous deliverance, and the visit of the Babylonian ambassadors. These oracles are arranged in topical rather than chronological order, though all occur within the time span of Isaiah's active prophetic ministry.

The second major section of the book is much more theoretical and is addressed to the captives in Babylon after the promised captivity has taken place. While the oracles of the first part of the book were mostly delivered orally and then written down, these chapters were probably issued originally in written form, perhaps during the declining years of Hezekiah and the coregency of his wicked son Manasseh, when Isaiah's presence would not have been as welcome in court.

Though it is surely no more than a coincidence, scholars have often noted the fact that the first part of the book of Isaiah contains thirty-nine chapters while the second part contains twenty-seven, thus corresponding to the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. While the themes of judgment and salvation make the correspondence appealing, we should draw no conclusions from the coincidence because, among other reasons, the chapter divisions in the Bible were not introduced until the Middle Ages, though it does serve as a useful memory aid.

MAJOR THEMES

Several major themes may be cited from the writings of Isaiah, but perhaps the greatest may be drawn from a title for God used frequently throughout the book, but rarely used elsewhere in

Scripture. Isaiah often refers to God as *The Holy One of Israel*. The vision of God that constituted Isaiah's call to prophetic ministry obviously made a great impression upon him, so that he clearly saw God as both perfectly holy and as the One who draws near to His people, both in judgment and in salvation.

Isaiah also concerns himself with God's sovereignty over the nations and His corresponding faithfulness to His people. The oracles of judgment show that God is not only the God of Israel, but is the sovereign Lord over all the nations of the earth, and the promises given to the generation of the captivity show that God holds the nations in His hand and controls whatever they may do for the benefit of those who belong to Him.

Messianic themes run throughout Isaiah, of course, and the Messianic passages fall into two categories - those that speak of the Messiah (a title Isaiah never uses) as the King setting up His Kingdom, and those that speak of Him as the Servant who suffers on behalf of His people. It is largely because of these Messianic passages that Isaiah is quoted so frequently in the New Testament (only the Psalter is quoted more often). No Old Testament writer gives us a more beautiful picture of the work of Christ.

THE TEXT OF THE BOOK

One final note should be made about the text of Isaiah. For many years, the oldest known manuscript of the book in Hebrew was a copy of the Masoretic Text from the ninth century AD. In 1947, however, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered at Qumran. Included among these scrolls were two manuscripts of Isaiah, one of which was virtually complete and dated to about 250 BC. The Dead Sea Scrolls manuscript and the Masoretic Text were almost identical, providing strong evidence for the integrity of the transmission of the text of the books of Scripture. More to the point, however, the Dead Sea Scrolls copy showed no evidence of the "Deutero-Isaiah" theory. The only break in the text occurs between chapters 33 and 34 - the half-way point of the book, and the beginning of chapter 40 actually begins near the bottom of a column, indistinguishable from the preceding text. The scholars of Qumran thus had no idea that the book had been recently edited from the work of at least two or three authors!

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Isaiah wrote during the period of Assyrian ascendancy. How did the actions of the Assyrian kings Tiglath-pileser, Sargon, and Sennacherib influence the ministry of the prophet?
2. What are the major reasons why critics question the authorship of the book of Isaiah? What responses may be given to their arguments? How do the Dead Sea Scrolls undermine the arguments of the critics?
3. Why does the authorship of the book of Isaiah matter? Why is denial of the authorship stated in Isaiah 1:1 an implicit denial of the inspiration of Scripture?
4. In what significant way does the structure of the book of Isaiah resemble that of the book of Romans?
5. What are the major themes of the book of Isaiah? How do these relate to Isaiah's prophecies about the coming Messiah?

STUDIES IN ISAIAH II

Isaiah 6

Our first study from the book of the prophet Isaiah will take us to the record of his prophetic call in chapter six. While one might naturally think that the call of the prophet would occupy the first chapter of his writings, we must remember that, in the ancient world, and especially in the minds of the prophets themselves, the message took priority over the messenger. If the message is indeed primary, the first five chapters, which establish the incorrigible wickedness of the people and the longsuffering of God, serve as an appropriate foundation for the call of the prophet - the wickedness of the people allows us to understand God's discouraging words to Isaiah when He tells the prophet that his message will be one of judgment that the people will not heed, yet the call of Isaiah in itself is a demonstration of God's mercy and faithfulness and will be used centuries later to encourage the very remnant that the Lord promises to preserve.

ISAIAH'S VISION OF THE GLORY OF GOD (6:1-4)

In this passage, Isaiah sees a vision of the Lord in the Temple. It is not necessary for Isaiah to have been in the Temple when he saw the vision, though some commentators speculate that he was. In fact, this is rather unlikely, since the section of the Temple thought to be the Throne Room of God - the Holy of Holies - was off limits to all but the high priest on the Day of Atonement. In any case, it is irrelevant to our understanding of the passage where Isaiah happened to be when he saw the vision recorded here. Let's look at some of the details of the vision.

Verse 1 - As noted last week, Uzziah died in the year 740 BC. This was a crucial time in the history of the ancient Near East, since the Assyrian Empire was about to rise to a place of supremacy under the leadership of Tiglath-Pileser III. Isaiah sees, however, not the might of the king of Assyria, but the holiness of the Lord. One who sees the latter need never fear the former - a lesson that Isaiah evidently learned very well. More to the point, the fact that Judah had just lost its king need not be a cause for panic, since the real King of Judah was alive and well indeed.

The Ark of the Covenant was pictured as the footstool of the Lord (not, like the picture painted in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, His dwelling place) in His throne room, the Holy of Holies. The fact that His train fills the Temple utilizes great size as a symbol of majesty (this was common in descriptions of deity found in the writings of the ancient world).

Verse 2 - The seraphim worshiping around the throne of God are angelic beings. The term used here is the same one used to describe the fiery serpents God sent among the people in Numbers 21:6-9, and it is used again by Isaiah in 14:29 and 30:6 to describe "fiery flying serpents" associated with God's judgment of Philistia and Judah, respectively. The root word refers to *burning*. Did Isaiah see these angelic beings as six-winged serpents with feet, hands, and faces? Certainly this is possible, since supernatural beings are often pictured in the ancient world as composites of features from various creatures (see, for instance, the vision of God in Ezekiel 1). In any case, we know that angels are spirits, so that the form of their appearance is somewhat irrelevant, and also that there is considerable variety in the heavenly host. Should this surprise us, given the variety that exists among God's earthly creatures? More to the point, the covering of faces and feet is an indication of humility in the presence of the Almighty.

Verse 3 - The cry of the seraphim sounds a keynote in the prophecy of Isaiah, as we saw last week. The prophet often refers to God as *The Holy One of Israel*, and this incident explains why. Note that God is pictured as both transcendent, separate from His creation by His perfect holiness, and imminent, filling the whole earth rather than being far off from His people. What Isaiah sees is not the Lord Himself, but His glory, as Moses had done (Exodus 33:18-20).

The threefold ascription of holiness to the Lord has often been seen as an indication of the Triune nature of the Godhead, and so it may be. While Calvin maintained that “if I had to contend with heretics, I would rather choose to employ stronger proofs,” commentators from the early Church Fathers onward have seen the doctrine of the Trinity in this verse. In fact, there is scriptural warrant for such a conclusion, since in John 12:41, the apostle, after quoting from Isaiah 6, says that Isaiah “saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him.”

Verse 4 - The theophany is accompanied by physical manifestations, not unlike the fire and smoke associated with the appearance of God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18). This is another indication of the greatness of the Lord.

ISAIAH’S SIN AND CLEANSING (6:5-7)

Verse 5 - Isaiah’s cry of “Woe” echoes the woes of the opening chapters (e.g., 5:21-22) in pronouncing the sins of the people, with which Isaiah identifies. He is no prophet who pronounces doom from a distance, but clearly recognizes that he shares the guilt of those to whom he ministers. His sense of his own sin is exacerbated by his vision of the Holy One, before whom even the sinless seraphim cover their eyes. The mention of the lips reminds one of James 3, with its insistence that anyone who has not sinned with his tongue is perfect indeed.

Verses 6-7 - While it is true that one who would minister the Word of God must see his own sin and identify with those to whom he is called to minister, it is also true that one who would preach God’s Word must be cleansed by means of an atonement that only God Himself can provide. Fire destroys, but it also purifies, and the coal from the altar cleanses Isaiah’s sin. This reminds us that it is only upon the altar, where the blood of the sacrifice is shed, that remission of sins is to be found. Isaiah’s mouth is cleansed here, not only because it is the seat of human sinfulness, but also because it is the instrument that God has chosen to use to spread His Word.

ISAIAH’S CALL AND CHARGE (6:8-10)

Verse 8 - Did Isaiah volunteer, or was he drafted? Some of each, of course. The young prophet was so humbled before the presence of God that he could as soon refuse God’s call as he could ignore the presence of the glorious angelic beings surrounding the throne. Yet Isaiah did “offer his body as a living sacrifice,” as Paul encourages all believers to do. A heart that is willing to serve is a heart that has been transformed by the grace of God.

We should also note in passing the Trinitarian implications of the “us” in this verse. Though some have argued that the reference is to the Lord and the heavenly host by which He is surrounded, we nowhere in Scripture find that the angels serve as some sort of council who, with God, render decisions and send out messengers.

Verses 9-10 - Verse 8, which is used so often to encourage young people to commit their lives to foreign missions, is too often taken out of context. If preachers were to read the two verses that follow, how many would raise their hands and volunteer to be missionaries? We see here that part of God's judgment upon the people of Judah is to send them prophets to whom they will not listen. This is not a pleasant or fulfilling experience for the prophet, of course, but it is nonetheless part of God's purpose (note that Jesus quotes these verses when explaining why He speaks in parables in Matthew 13:14-15). Isaiah thus is called to a ministry of failure, at least from the human perspective. We must remember, of course, that on one noteworthy day Hezekiah did listen and the Lord demonstrated His power in a mighty way, and that the generation of the Captivity, though they lived long after Isaiah's death, derived much comfort from the words of his prophecy. And how many in the centuries since have been drawn to worship God through the words spoken and penned by Isaiah?

For us, this is a reminder that lack of positive response is not an indication that God is not at work in our ministries. When we witness to our neighbors or co-workers or seek to establish relationships that never seem to get anywhere spiritually, we must remember that the hand of the sovereign God is at work, not only through the acceptance of His message by those who have been ordained for life from before the foundation of the world, but also by the rejection of those whose hearts have been hardened by sin.

THE CAPTIVITY AND THE REMNANT (6:11-13)

Isaiah understandably is upset by his commission and asks the Lord how long the judgment of blindness and deafness will rest upon the people.

Verses 11-12 - God's answer is a discouraging one - until the land has been devastated by an invading army and the people have been taken away into captivity (note that this argues against the liberal division of the book - Isaiah was clearly told about the captivity concerning which he was later to prophesy).

Verse 13 - Only a remnant will remain, but that remnant will be the objects of God's blessing. The image of the tree, cut down but not dead, is one that recalls a number of biblical images, both in Isaiah and elsewhere. One thinks of the Branch who is to rise from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1), the olive tree that is cut down and then grafted back in again (Romans 11), and the seeds sown in Jesus' parable, most of which fall on fruitless soil, but some of which fall on good ground and bear much fruit. And isn't it marvelous that God, in His boundless grace, actually calls this almost-dead stump "holy" - the same term used earlier in the chapter to describe the Almighty Himself! God's mercy to His own is beyond comprehension, as is His promise to those who belong to Him.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How do the first five chapters of the book of Isaiah provide important context for the prophet's call to ministry?
2. Why was the vision of God as the ruling King important to Isaiah and the people to whom he prophesied? Why is such a picture of God important for us today?

3. How does the vision of the Lord seen by Isaiah illustrate both His transcendence and His immanence? Why should these aspects of God's nature be a comfort to us, as they were to the prophet?
4. Isaiah was terrified by the vision he saw. If we truly were to understand who God is, should we be terrified as well? Why or why not?
5. Why do some commentators believe that the Second Person of the Trinity was involved in the vision seen by Isaiah?
6. How does the vision seen by Isaiah demonstrate the need for atonement, and thus point us toward the work of Christ on the cross?
7. God calls Isaiah to what appears to be a ministry of failure. In what ways did his preaching indeed fail? In what ways was it successful, though he never lived to see its fruit in most cases? What does this tell us about how we should judge our own service for the Lord?
8. How does the image of the almost-dead tree in the last verse of the chapter provide a picture, both of God's judgment and His grace?

STUDIES IN ISAIAH III

Isaiah 7:1-8:10

There were two major historical events that formed the framework for the ministry of the prophet Isaiah; the first of these, the threatened invasion of Judah by the military alliance of Israel and Syria, provides the context for the next two lessons. With the rise of Tiglath-Pileser to the throne of Assyria, the vicious militarists from the Fertile Crescent became a threat to the Eastern Mediterranean world. In 735 BC, Pekah king of Israel and Rezin king of Syria formed an alliance against the Assyrians and tried to force Ahaz king of Judah to join them. When Ahaz refused, Pekah and Rezin threatened to invade the Southern Kingdom and replace Ahaz with an anti-Assyrian puppet, referred to in today's passage as the son of Tabeel. Ahaz then sought the help of the Assyrians to put down the threat from his northern neighbors. It is in the context of this struggle that Isaiah comes to Ahaz and speaks of what God will do. Today's passage contains four messages from God delivered through the prophet Isaiah, three of which focus on children with symbolic names.

SHEARJASHUB AND THE ORACLE OF HOPE (7:1-9)

Verses 1-2 - This refers to the threatened invasion spoken of in the introduction to the lesson. The hearts of king and people alike are shaken because they are not trusting in the Lord their God, the Holy One of Israel seen by Isaiah in his vision. Note the peculiarity of the language in which Ahaz is referred to as "the house of David." Ahaz was not a godly man at all, and in fact was an idolater, so the identification of him with his godly forebear indicates two things - both that God is being faithful to the covenant He made with David even if David's heirs are not, and that the words to be spoken by Isaiah have ramifications for the entire dynasty, not just for this one wicked king.

Verse 3 - The name of Isaiah's elder son means "a remnant will return" and sums up one of the great promises that runs through the entire prophecy of Isaiah. The prophet meets Ahaz while the king is inspecting the city of Jerusalem's water system - a necessary task when one is anticipating a siege.

Verses 4-6 - Isaiah's initial message to Ahaz is one of comfort. No conditions are given. The prophet simply asserts that there is no reason for fear. Rezin and Pekah may be angry men, but they are no more than smoldering stubs of firewood - their flames are about to be extinguished.

Verses 7-9 - God assures Ahaz that the proposed invasion will never occur. In fact, Israel and Syria will soon be destroyed. The time reference here is a bit problematic. Syria was conquered by Tiglath-Pileser in 732 BC and Rezin was executed; that part is simple. But the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by Sargon in 722 BC, at which time Samaria was destroyed and the people were scattered. What, then, could be the reference to 65 years? What happened in 670 BC? Many scholars have concluded that the reference here is to the policy of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon, who aggressively mixed populations in order to prevent revolt among his subject peoples. During his reign, peoples from other parts of the Assyrian empire were moved into Israel, where they eventually intermarried with the remaining Israelite population, becoming what were later known to history as the Samaritans. Thus, perhaps, we have the reference to Ephraim no longer being a people.

IMMANUEL AND THE ORACLE OF DESTRUCTION (7:10-25)

Verses 10-12 - While it is not unheard of for God to give signs (cf. I Samuel 2:34; II Kings 19:29), even when a request for one indicates a lack of faith (Judges 6:36-40), it is unusual indeed for God to encourage someone to ask for a sign. The response of Ahaz, perhaps alluding to Deuteronomy 6:16, is not one of humility but of hypocrisy. If he really feared the Lord, he would neither have encouraged idolatry among the people nor called for help from the ungodly king of Assyria.

Verses 13-17 - Isaiah expresses God's impatience with the hypocrisy of Ahaz, then tells him that the Lord will give him a sign whether he asks for one or not. A child is to be born who will bear the symbolic name Immanuel ("God is with us"). Before this child is old enough to eat solid food or know right from wrong, the lands of Israel and Syria will be plundered by the Assyrians. However, the Assyrians will not plunder Israel and Syria alone - they will also invade the Southern Kingdom of Judah; this occurred during the reign of Hezekiah with the invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BC.

This prophecy is noteworthy also, of course, because it is quoted by Matthew in connection with the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:22-23). Matthew's use of the prophecy raises many questions about its proper interpretation, and scholars have come up with a variety of suggestions. Liberal critics tend to argue that Isaiah 7:14 should be understood purely in the context of the reign of Ahaz, and that Matthew was drawing an unwarranted theological conclusion from a questionable translation used in the Septuagint (the Hebrew word in Isaiah 7:14 is *'almah*, meaning a young woman of marriageable age, while the Septuagint, along with Matthew, uses the Greek *parthenos*, which refers to a woman who has never engaged in sexual intercourse). Since liberals don't believe in the Virgin Birth anyway, this is not surprising.

On the other hand, some evangelicals are far too eager to see Christ as the sole focus of this prophecy and deny the immediate referent to the conditions of the world in which Isaiah lived. The context, however, requires that the prophecy refer to a contemporary child. Who was that child? Several proposals have been made by commentators. Some believe Isaiah 7:14 refers to some unknown child soon to be born of a young woman in the royal family who was actually named Immanuel. Others think it refers to Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, though the chronology here doesn't fit with the birth of Hezekiah. In my opinion, however, the best solution is to see the immediate fulfillment of the prophecy in the birth of Mahershalalhashbaz, the second son of Isaiah; we will see the connection when we look at chapter 8.

We should conclude, then, that the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 refers neither exclusively to the time of Ahaz nor exclusively to the time of Christ. Instead, the word spoken by Isaiah to his own generation contained the seed of a greater fulfillment to come.

Verses 18-20 - Here we have a description of Sennacherib's invasion. God moves the nations by the mere act of whistling, just as He brought the worlds into existence by speaking (it was commonly believed in that day that a swarm of bees could be drawn from its hive by whistling). The invaders will be everywhere, and captives will be humiliated by having their beards, heads and legs shaved.

Verses 21-25 - After the invasion is over, there will be enough food for those who remain, but the former prosperity will be gone, and they will live their lives in fear. The prosperous agrarian economy will be replaced by that of the shepherd. In other words, civilization will be set back several centuries by the damage done by the Assyrian invaders.

MAHERSHALALHASHBAZ AND THE FULFILLMENT OF THE FIRST ORACLE (8:1-4)

Here we have the birth of Isaiah's second son, whose name means "quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil." The "scroll" in verse 1 is more likely a cylinder seal on which important events were engraved by a stylus. We have no knowledge of the Zechariah mentioned in verse 2, but Uriah was a priest who assisted Ahaz in his introduction of idol worship in Judah (II Kings 16:10-11). To include such men as "reliable witnesses" to what God is about to do is therefore somewhat ironic, to say the least. The birth of Isaiah's son is proclaimed, and we are told that the nations of Israel and Syria would be destroyed before the child can speak. The similarity of the time language in 7:16 and 8:4 would seem to indicate that Mahershalalhashbaz is the immediate fulfillment of the prophecy of 7:14. Thus, the deliverance from the threatened invasion is the sign that God is with His people, even under the rule of the apostate Ahaz and his henchmen. God's presence will continue to be among His people even during the destruction wrought in the Assyrian invasion, as well as during and after the Babylonian Captivity with which the end of the book deals. Even as the invaders rush to the spoil, the remnant will survive because God is with them.

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE SECOND ORACLE (8:5-10)

Verses 6-8 - The image here relates to Ahaz's plea for help to the Assyrians. The Shiloah is the aqueduct that brings water into the city of Jerusalem for storage in the pool of Siloam, while the River refers to the Euphrates, along the banks of which the Assyrian empire made its home. Instead of being satisfied with God's provision, the people of Judah are dancing in the streets because Assyria has destroyed Rezin and the Arameans, not realizing that they are next. When the Assyrians do invade in the time of Sennacherib, they will torch city after city, advancing to the gates of Jerusalem itself (a flood "reaching up to the neck") before being turned aside by the intervening power of God.

Verses 9-10 - Ultimately, however, the invaders will not succeed against the people of God. The River will flood, but will not drown the Chosen People. The remnant will remain, a living evidence of the presence of God with those who belong to Him.

The application of the prophecies of Isaiah in the time of Ahaz to the coming of Christ gives them obvious relevance for us. In the same way that God saved His sinful people in spite of themselves by turning back the Assyrian invasion before all hope was lost, so the One who was literally the child of the Virgin defeated sin and death, and in the process demonstrated God's faithfulness to His promises and to His people. Not only do we know that God is with us because of the birth of Christ, but because of His death, resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, He is with us always, even to the end of the age. But, like Ahaz, we must remember that "if [we] do not stand in [our] faith, [we] will not stand at all" (Isaiah 7:9).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What was the political context of this portion of Isaiah's prophecy?
2. What is the meaning of the cryptic reference to sixty-five years in Isaiah 7:8? How does the fulfillment of this prophecy eventually have an impact on New Testament history?
3. How do we know that the refusal of Ahaz to ask for a sign was a mark of hypocrisy rather than piety?
4. Why should we see the famous sign prophesied by Isaiah in verse 14 as having a double fulfillment? What was the immediate significance of the prophecy? Why are the critics wrong in asserting that Matthew misused the verse?
5. God's people have often lived in sinful environments. God's promise to be with His people, even in such dreadful circumstances, is intended to provide comfort and security. How is such a promise meaningful to us as well?

STUDIES IN ISAIAH IV

Isaiah 8:11-9:7

The passage before us today continues the theme of the threatened invasion of Judah by Israel and Syria and the Assyrian invasion that will follow. As was true of the passage we studied last week, Messianic themes are prevalent, as may be seen by the frequency with which this portion of Isaiah's prophecy is cited in the New Testament.

GOD'S JUDGMENT ON THE UNBELIEF OF THE PEOPLE (8:11-22)

Verses 11-12 - The servant of God is always susceptible to the temptation to suit his message to the mood of the people. One of the ways this can happen is when God's man allows the people among whom he is ministering to set the agenda toward which the message is to be directed. In Isaiah's case, the agenda of the king and people required that their eyes be directed toward the prospective invaders, Israel and Syria; these northern "powers" were the focus of their attention and the ones about whom they wanted to hear an oracle from the Lord. Instead, Isaiah had dismissed them in a few words, while encouraging Ahaz and the people to devote their attention to God, who was not only their faithful deliverer, but also the only real threat to their well-being as a nation.

In our own day, the servant of the Lord is equally tempted to allow the recipients of his message to set the agenda for what he preaches. Too often we focus our preaching on "felt needs" because that is the exclusive object of our hearers' attention. What winds up being left out is any real attention to God. When God sets the agenda, the preacher's words often concentrate only briefly on what the people fear, then turn in great power to what they *should* fear.

Verse 13 - What the people should fear, of course, is God Himself. Isaiah harkens back to his own vision of the holiness of God, and we are reminded of His reaction to that vision.

Verse 14 - The prophet then uses two images in verse 14 to describe God. While he begins by describing God as a sanctuary, he immediately digs deeper and notes that God is the Rock upon which the sanctuary is built, like the Temple in Jerusalem was built on the Temple Mount. The Rock is often used as an image of God as a refuge in the Old Testament (e.g., Deuteronomy 32:4), but for Israel and Judah it will not be a place of safety, but a boulder over which they trip and a rock on which their feet slip, plunging them into an abyss. The holy God is not a refuge to a disobedient people, but instead a bringer of disaster. The writers of the New Testament saw the fulfillment of this prophecy in Christ (Matthew 21:44; Romans 9:33; I Peter 2:8), the promised King rejected by His own people and thus become an instrument of judgment to them.

The second image used to describe God in verse 14 is that of a hunter. In 7:24, the people were reduced to the status of hunters after the debacle of the Assyrian invasion. Now, they are reduced to the status of prey, as the Lord Himself becomes the hunter in search of His quarry. This is not the picture painted by Francis Thompson in his famous poem *The Hound of Heaven*, where God is the Hunter who in mercy seeks those who flee from Him, but rather the relentless Judge from whom there is no escape.

Verse 15 - This verse is an example of the limitations of Bible translation. The power of the poetry in this verse underscores the disaster that awaits the people by using alliteration (repetition of initial sounds) and consonance (repetition of closing sounds); the language in Hebrew thus pounds on the ears of the hearers by the sheer weight of repetition the doom that awaits them.

Verses 16-17 - If God is withdrawing from the people of Israel and Judah, His prophet must do the same. Isaiah thus seals up the words of his prophecy so they may not be altered (contrary to the redactor theories so prevalent in Old Testament criticism), and he and his small band of followers retreat to wait on the Lord, assured that the words He has spoken will come to pass.

Verse 18 - We have already seen that Isaiah's two sons bore symbolic names consonant with the main thrusts of his prophetic ministry. He recognizes that the naming of his children was a part of the work God had given them to do; that they serve as living symbols of the word spoken through the mouth of their father. The writer of Hebrews quotes from this verse in Hebrews 2:13, applying it to Christ and the Church. In the same way that Isaiah and his followers represented the remnant spared from the judgment of God and thus objects of His deliverance, so Christ and those who trust in Him stand as the faithful remnant among the unbelieving Jews to whom the writer of Hebrews warns his readers against returning.

Verses 19-20 - As was the case with Saul, when God is silent, the people turn to other sources of "revelation." We are, by virtue of having been created in the image of God, spiritual beings who can never be satisfied by the material world alone. The result is that when the true Word is withdrawn, people seek to fill the void in their lives with what purports to be insight. During this time in Israel, there is abundant evidence to show that a cult of the dead flourished; among other things, ancestors were honored and consulted as sources of both protection and insight into the events of the future. As has always been the case, however, the touchstone of truth is the Word of God, not the babblings of the seers (cf. Deuteronomy 18:21-22).

Verses 21-22 - The chapter ends with a picture of hopelessness. The people are hungry and destitute, looking for someone to blame. The king is the first target of their wrath, with some justification. Ultimately, however, they do what all men do - they blame God and, having turned away from Him, see nothing before them but utter darkness. How many in our dark world demonstrate this same sequence of events? The darkness of our own age stems ultimately from the same causes.

DELIVERANCE THROUGH THE COMING OF A DIVINE KING (9:1-7)

Verses 1-2 - God, however, is a God of mercy, faithful to His promises and to His people. He does not leave them in despair, but instead shows mercy at the point of their greatest need. When Tiglath-Pileser invaded the coastal region in 733 BC, he reduced the territory of Israel, seizing most of it and creating three new Assyrian provinces ("Zebulun and Naphtali," "Galilee of the Gentiles," and "the way of the sea" refer to these three provinces), leaving a much smaller kingdom of Israel under the rule of an Assyrian puppet, Hoshea. At this point, Isaiah's prophecy becomes explicitly Messianic. There was no deliverance in Isaiah's day or in the centuries that followed for Assyria's Galilean provinces. The light they experienced was not the light of political liberation, but the light of the Messiah, as is indicated by Matthew's use of these verses in Matthew 4:15-16. When Jesus

concentrated His ministry in Galilee, the people who had been in darkness for centuries following the Assyrian conquest saw the light of God for the first time since the prophetic word had been withdrawn from them.

Verses 3-5 - Isaiah now uses a series of images to describe the joy that follows the coming of the Messiah. The time in which light overcomes darkness is compared to the time of harvest with its accompanying festivals, to victory in a great battle after which plunder is seized by the victorious soldiers, and to the triumph of Gideon over the Midianites through which the Israelites were liberated from bondage. The conquerors who had oppressed God's people are no more, and their boots and bloody clothing are destroyed in a celebratory bonfire.

Verses 6-7 - What is the cause of this celebration? A new king has come, the fulfillment of the promise of Immanuel. He is divine in His wisdom and power; He is King over time and space. The coming of this promised King will not be by the will of man, but by the "zeal of the Lord Almighty." We thus see a deliverance that goes far beyond the political situation of Isaiah's day and reaches forward many centuries to the coming of the Son of God into the world. He is the one who will establish an everlasting kingdom of peace and righteousness. By God's mercy, He has incorporated us into that kingdom.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In Isaiah 8:11-13, the prophet did not allow the people to set the agenda for his ministry. Too often today, preachers allow the surrounding world to determine the subject matter of their preaching. Why is it important that we allow God and His Word to determine what we ought to think about, hear, and to what we should give our primary attention?
2. How does Isaiah use the rock as an image of both judgment and deliverance? How does the Scripture elsewhere do the same thing? Consider particularly how Christ is pictured both as a rock that destroys and one that provides safety.
3. How does the image of the remnant frequently cited by Isaiah serve to point us to Christ? How does it apply to us as His Church?
4. Why do people who refuse to follow God often turn around and blame Him for the troubles in their lives? How do we see evidence of this in our world today?
5. Why do scholars argue that Isaiah 9:1-7 is the first explicitly Messianic prophecy in the book, though certainly not the first having application to the coming King? What are the characteristics of this Child, and how are these qualities fulfilled in Christ?

STUDIES IN ISAIAH V

Isaiah 11

When we looked last week at the beginning of Isaiah 9, we saw the first clearly and exclusively Messianic passage in Isaiah's prophecy. After words of judgment against both Israel and Assyria in the rest of chapter nine and chapter ten, Isaiah returns to his theme of the coming Messianic king and His kingdom in chapter 11. As was the case in chapter 9, this prophecy is purely Messianic and has no contemporary referent.

THE CHARACTER OF THE KING (11:1-5)

Verse 1 - We have already seen the prophet use the image of the stump to describe what would remain after God poured out His judgment against His people in Isaiah 6:13. The remnant was then pictured as a shoot growing out of that stump - new life from what appeared to be dead. Here, the same image is applied to the royal family of David. The monarchy had indeed fallen in the years following the division of the kingdom. Beginning with the Babylonian Captivity, the monarchy would disappear completely, though the House of David would remain, as the genealogy in Matthew 1 makes clear. According to Isaiah, this Branch who would arise from the stump of the royal family would be a fruit-bearing branch - the monarchy would come to life once again.

It is worth noting that Matthew 2:23, which can be connected directly with no Old Testament passage, is generally believed by scholars to be an allusion to this verse. The Hebrew word translated *branch* in Isaiah 11:1 is *netzer*, which is at least reminiscent of the name of the town in which Jesus grew up.

Verses 2-3a - The Messianic king introduced in chapter 9 is unquestionably divine, but here He is pictured as controlled by and dependent on the Spirit of the Lord and living in the fear of the Lord. As noted by Geoffrey Grogan in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, this is "a combination that requires the Incarnation for its explanation." The sevenfold use of the Spirit of the Lord in verse 2 - a general statement followed by three pairs of characteristics - may indicate the fullness with which the Spirit indwells the coming king. The Messiah will have both the wisdom to know what to do and the power to carry it out. And unlike the kings with whom the people of Isaiah's day were familiar, this coming king would "delight in the fear of the Lord." How often are these very characteristics manifested in the earthly life of the Son of God? How often does He speak of the Spirit of the Lord as the driving power behind His ministry (Luke 4:18-21) and affirm that His purpose on earth is to do the will of the Father who sent Him (e.g., John 8:29)?

Verses 3b-5 - Any king is judged by the judgments he renders, particularly in difficult cases. Solomon's renown came from the fact that he was wiser than any ruler on the face of the earth and passed down judgments that cut through the knottiest of problems. The wise judgment of the Messiah is demonstrated by the fact that He sees beneath the surface, judging the heart as well as the evidence; that He protects the poor and needy, who were often victimized by the judicial system of the day; and that He uses His power to punish the wicked (note that this king's powers of judgment extend to the whole earth). The Word He speaks is a Word of power, accomplishing what it enunciates (cf. Hebrews 4:12). Righteousness and faithfulness are pictured as His "foundation garments" - those put on before anything else, and without which a man would be naked. Truly "a

greater than Solomon is here” (cf. Matthew 12:42). How do we see Christ in this picture? Did He not reach out to the poor and outcast of society and draw to Himself those who were not mighty or noble or of great reputation, while at the same time undercutting the authority of those who cherished their earthly power?

THE NATURE OF HIS KINGDOM (11:6-9)

The utopian society pictured in these verses echoes similar passages in earlier writings in the Ancient Near East. Many kings describe their kingdoms in these ideal terms. We should not conclude, however, that Isaiah’s description is a mere parroting of pagan writings. Several things should be noted as we examine this description of the Messiah’s kingdom.

First of all, the kingdom of the Messiah undoes the consequences of the Fall of Man. In the Garden of Eden, the relationships among God’s creatures described here existed in reality - the animals lived at peace with one another and with man, carnivorous behavior did not exist, and the natural world submitted gladly to the dominion of man; even the serpent, the symbol of evil, submits to the control of a child, the weakest among the race of God’s image-bearers.

Secondly, the reason given for the existence of this utopian society differs from that found in similar manuscripts in the ancient world. It is the universal knowledge of God that makes the earth a paradise. Only as man and beast alike know their Master can they live in harmony with one another, and the reign of the Messiah will bring this to pass. Thus will come about the liberation of the creation of which Paul speaks in Romans 8:19-21. But the result will be far greater than merely the restoration of the pre-Fall economy. Redemption will produce not only the harmony that was lost through sin, but also a knowledge of Christ as the Savior of His people that will make His Kingdom a far more joyful place than Eden ever could have been.

Of course, we cannot leave this passage without at least commenting briefly on the eschatological character of the scene described in these verses. Is this description to be taken literally? Should we anticipate a day when the earth will be restored to Edenic glory under the rule of the Second Adam, or is this passage to be taken as symbolic of spiritual realities under the heavenly reign of Christ? Obviously, those of differing eschatological perspectives would answer the question in different ways. Premillennialists would see these verses as describing in literal terms the character of the physical reign of Christ on earth for a thousand years after His return (cf. Revelation 20:1-6), while postmillennialists would look for such a utopian society to result from the submission of the entire world to Christ through the work of His Church in spreading the good news of the Kingdom of God. Amillennialists, who are the least inclined to take passages such as these literally, would see them as either a picture of the spiritual peace and harmony that comes to those who are part of Christ’s kingdom or as a symbolic description of the glories of the eternal state in heaven. Even there the description cannot be thought to be literal, since Scripture provides no evidence that animals will be involved in the eternal state (despite use of the passage made by pet-lovers who cannot stand to think of a heaven that would not include Fido).

THE EXTENT OF HIS KINGDOM (11:10-16)

The peace and harmony described in verses 6-9 in connection with the animal kingdom is here extended to the world of man. The Messiah will restore peace on earth on many different levels.

Verses 10-11 - A banner is a rallying point around which people gather. In Exodus 17:15, the Lord describes Himself as the Banner of His people after He gives them victory over the Amalekites. Unlike the Exodus, when God called a nation-sized group of people out of Egypt to bring them to the Promised Land for the first time, in this passage God calls what is left of that people - the remnant - out of the lands to which they have been scattered by His wrath and judgment. The lands described in verse 11 represent, not the lands of the Israelite dispersion (though quite a few from the Northern Kingdom did wind up in Assyria), but the points of the compass - lands to the northeast (Assyria), southwest (Egypt, Cush), southeast (Elam, Babylonia), north (Hamath), and west (islands of the Mediterranean), thus indicating the universality of the regathering of the remnant of God's people into the kingdom of the Messiah.

Verses 12-13 - The regathering under the banner of the Messiah will not only involve the bringing together of God's people geographically, but will also produce harmony where there was enmity before. Instead of Israel and Judah being enemies who feared and hated one another, they will become one people again. The people of the Messiah will be, as Jesus prayed to His Father, "one as we are one" (John 17:22).

Verse 14 - In the same way that the power of great empires over the people of God will be broken, so His people will gain victory over their near neighbors. No forces of this world will be able to stand against the power of Messiah's kingdom, and nothing will keep Him from uniting those who belong to Him.

Verse 15-16 - The image used here again harks back to the Exodus. In the same way that God miraculously dried up the Red Sea with a mighty wind so His people could walk across, He will not allow the mighty Euphrates to act as a barrier to the return of the remnant.

What we see here, then, is a picture of the kingdom of the Messiah triumphant over all. God's people are united under the rule of the coming king, and their foes are powerless to stop them. Men and beasts will live at peace, for all will know the God who made them. In the light of this picture of hope, how can God's people fear, whether they live in the eighth century BC or the twenty-first century AD - no matter what their understanding of eschatology may be?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the significance of the reference to the coming Messianic king as the Branch.
2. Discuss the ways in which Isaiah 11:2-5 prefigure the earthly ministry of Jesus.
3. Why is the Messianic kingdom described in Isaiah 11:6-9 much more than simply a return to Eden?
4. How do believers of different eschatological perspectives understand Isaiah 11:6-9?
5. How does the closing section of Isaiah 11 give hope to Christians today?

STUDIES IN ISAIAH VI

Isaiah 40

At this point in the course, we take a large leap to the beginning of the second part of Isaiah's prophecy, skipping over both the oracles of judgment in chapters 12-35 and the historical interlude concerning the invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BC and its failure due to divine intervention in chapters 36-37, the story of Hezekiah's illness and God's extension of his life for fifteen years in chapter 38, and the story of the arrival of the Babylonian ambassadors in chapter 39. The last of these sets the stage for the second part of Isaiah's prophecy, since the riches viewed by the Babylonian ambassadors helped to motivate the eventual invasion and conquest of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar a century later. Though chapter 39 ends with Hezekiah's self-centered sigh of relief, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime," the peace and security did not last long, and the people were carried off to Babylon. It is to those captives in Babylon that Isaiah addresses the words found in the second major section of his book.

THE COMING OF THE LORD (40:1-11)

Verse 1 - The change in tone here must have been a great relief to Isaiah as well as to the people who read his prophecy. After discharging the burden of speaking words of judgment to people who failed to heed his warning, Isaiah now is able to bring words of comfort, even though the recipients of those words are men and women born long after the prophet's death. In addition to the repetition of the word "comfort" for emphasis, God addresses "my people" and calls Himself "your God." The covenant is still in effect, and God is faithful to His promises from ages past.

Verse 2 - The chief character of the message of comfort is that the captivity in Babylon is at an end. God's judgment against His people has been carried out, and no more vengeance is to be taken against them. The good news that Judah's "sin has been paid for" will take on deeper meaning when the passages about the Suffering Servant find their fulfillment in Christ, but at this point the phrase speaks of the completeness of God's punishment of His people - seventy years, as foretold, would complete the requisite judgment. The reference to the fact that the nation had "received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins" could mean a number of things - as hyperbole indicating the thoroughness of God's judgment against them (cf. repetition of "comfort"), as an indication that God's people are judged more harshly than the unbelieving nations because they sin willfully against the Living God (cf. Jeremiah 16:18), or as an affirmation that God is the bearer, not only of judgment, but also of mercy as He deals with the sin of His wayward people.

Verses 3-5 - The picture here is of a city or province preparing for the visit of the king. In the Ancient Near East, travel was a dicey proposition at best, and when a king came to call, the locals rolled out the red carpet. Often this was accomplished by literally building roads into the city in order to ease the king's journey. The picture here has a somewhat different significance, however. The Lord is not coming to visit His people and admonishing them to build a road to make His trip easier. Instead, His journey will be for the purpose of bringing His people out of captivity; the road will be smoothed by others, most notably by Cyrus, the Persian king who is mentioned by name a few chapters later in Isaiah's prophecy. The purpose of this bulldozer activity will be to proclaim the glory of the Lord to all the nations.

The writers of the Synoptic Gospels all quote this passage in reference to the work of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6). Here the Forerunner prepares the way for the ministry of Christ. Like Isaiah, he announces that the solution for the sin of the people is at hand. God's forgiveness is offered to those who repent, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed as it never had been before, not even in Isaiah's great Temple vision.

Verses 6-8 - The captivity revealed clearly, among other things, the frailty of man and the truth of his mortality. Nothing human can long endure, but one thing does endure forever - the word of the Lord. His prophetic word is sure, and the generation of the Captivity is about to experience the faithfulness of that word. Peter quotes these verses in I Peter 1:24-25 to indicate the eternal nature of the Gospel that brings salvation to the people of God.

Verses 9-11 - In these verses, the NIV marginal reading is preferable because of the use of a feminine pronoun; Jerusalem is to proclaim glad tidings to the surrounding towns (the ESV affirms this reading). The good news is that God is coming to them. He comes as a Conqueror, as a Victor who brings His people, who are the spoils of His victory, back to their own land in His train, and as a Shepherd who tenderly cares for the weak and wounded. With the coming of Christ, it is again Jerusalem from which the good news is spread to the surrounding lands (Acts 1:8).

THE LORD WHO COMES (40:12-31)

This section of the chapter consists of five sets of rhetorical questions. The dialogue goes on through a series of questions posed by one who knows the Lord, followed by answers that underscore the knowledge of God that had been possessed by His people from ages past.

Verse 12 - Who is this God who comes in triumph? The first rhetorical questions are reminiscent of those posed by God to Job and demonstrate that God is the Creator whose feats are beyond human comprehension. Unlike the pagan gods of Babylon, the Lord perfectly controls the cosmos; He need not fight a war against its powers.

Verses 13-14 - In the polytheistic society of Babylon, the most important decisions were thought to be made by the gods in council. The Lord requires no councilors, however. He alone is God and has no peers in the cosmos.

Verses 15-17 - The greatness of God dwarfs anything considered great by the mind of man. When merchants sold their goods, they didn't worry about a single drop of liquid in a full bucket, nor did they concern themselves with dust on scales used to weigh out meat or fruit. As such things are insignificant to merchants, so the nations of the world are insignificant in comparison to the greatness of the true and living God. To Him, the might of Babylon is of little moment, less than nothing compared to His omnipotence.

Verses 18-20 - The second set of rhetorical questions asks the reader to compare God to the idols worshiped by the nations, and the answer makes it clear that there is no comparison. The gods of the nations are idols of gold and wood shaped by craftsmen. They have no power to save those who bow down to them (we will see a much fuller development of this contrast between the true God and idols next week when we look at chapter 44). The comparison between God and these images

is implicit rather than explicit, but there is no question that the God who brings His people out of captivity in triumph cannot be compared to the gods worshiped by the fallen foes, who were able to do nothing to foil the Lord's purposes.

Verses 21-24 - The third set of rhetorical questions reminds Isaiah's readers that the knowledge of God of which he speaks has been available to them from the beginning. God is no secret power who hides Himself from His people. Instead, He is the sovereign Lord of the cosmos and everything in it. He made the heavens, He rules the earth, and He raises up and pulls down the men who exert power among the peoples of the earth. Israel had long known this, but they needed constant reminders, even as we do. It is easy for those in captivity to look on their captors as too powerful to be changed, even by the hand of God. Yet we know that there is nothing too hard for Him.

Verse 25-26 - The fourth set of rhetorical questions again pictures God as one without peer. As noted before, the ancients tended to view the cosmos as preexisting, something to be conquered and shaped by the most powerful of the gods. The Lord here presents Himself as the Maker of the heavens - the one who names and numbers the stars.

Verse 27 - The last set of rhetorical questions gets down to the heart of the issue. With such a God as this, how can His people complain that He knows nothing of their plight or cares nothing for their suffering? The gods of the Babylonians were finite - there were things that escaped their notice. This allowed the gods to trick one another, and occasionally even an enterprising mortal could deceive the gods. In the light of such a pantheon, the people might wonder if they were being overlooked by the powers on high. No such thing is possible with the God of Israel, however. He sees all, knows all, and cares for His people according to the covenant He made with them long ago.

Verses 28-31 - Not only does the God of Israel neither slumber nor sleep (Psalm 121:3-4), but He gives strength to those who lack it. The journey back to Jerusalem from Babylon was a daunting one, and relatively few chose to brave the trip. But God here promises that He will give strength as needed, not only for the rare flights and occasional runs that characterize all of our lives, but also for the daily plodding that makes up most of our experience. Immanuel is with His people for the long haul, not just for the occasional spectacular moment, and He will see them through to the end of their journey (cf. Philippians 1:6).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Summarize the general content of Isaiah 12-39. How does that content connect the two sections of the book?
2. We are familiar with the Gospel application of Isaiah 4:3-5 to the ministry of John the Baptist, but what did it mean to the people to whom it was written? How do the two meanings relate to one another?
3. How do the rhetorical questions of Isaiah 40:12-31 distinguish the Lord from the pagan gods of Babylon?
4. How can the words addressed to the Israelites in captivity provide help and comfort for God's people today?

STUDIES IN ISAIAH VII

Isaiah 44

As we continue to work our way through selected studies from the prophecy of Isaiah, we arrive this week at a chapter that is notable for two reasons. First of all, it contains the most extensive discourse on the folly of idolatry found in the book. Here the prophet uses his poetic gifts to construct a satire that drives home with unerring skill the idiocy of those who would worship gods of their own making. Secondly, it is in chapter 44 that we find the first mention of Cyrus by name - Cyrus, the Persian king who would liberate the people of Judah from their captivity in Babylon in fulfillment of the Lord's promise through Isaiah. It is this very mention of Cyrus by name, of course, that provides the major argument for those deniers of predictive prophecy who insist that the second section of Isaiah's book must have been written after the completion of the Babylonian Captivity. But for those who believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, such an issue is small, for who can doubt that the God who can judge nations, deliver His people, and send His Son into the world to redeem sinners can do something as relatively insignificant as knowing the name of a world leader more than a century prior to his birth?

GOD'S BLESSING ON ISRAEL (44:1-5)

Each major section of the chapter is introduced by the same phrase - "This is what the Lord says." This formula is found frequently throughout the prophetic writings, but here serves to confirm God's nature as the God who sees and reveals the future through His prophets.

Verses 1-2 - God's words of comfort to His people continue. He addresses them as chosen ones, as His special creation, and uses the pet name *Jeshurun* ("Upright One") - a clear contrast to the name *Jacob* ("The Deceiver"). The juxtaposition of the two names indicates both what Judah is by nature and what they are by the grace of their God. The generation in captivity is not to fear that they have been cast off by their God; the One who made them is also the One who will deliver them. The language of election and redemption is echoed often in the words of the New Testament epistles.

Verses 3-4 - The blessing pictured here is both physical and spiritual. The barren waste that remained after the Babylonian Captivity will flower once again under the rains of God's blessing, while the Spirit of God will be poured out as well - language that is reminiscent of Joel 2:28-29 as well as Acts 2:17-28. The result will be bountiful offspring.

Verse 5 - The language here is one of voluntary identification, with the implication that those who are identifying with the people of God are not those born into covenant relationship. The idea of writing the name on the hand comes from the practice of slaves having the name of their master tattooed on their hands, and was a symbol of permanent ownership. We thus get a beautiful picture of the fact that God's intention is to spread His blessing to those beyond the scope of national Israel. Isaiah is, more than any other Old Testament prophet, the mouthpiece for God's universal purpose in the redemptive work He plans to accomplish through His Servant.

THE GREATNESS OF GOD AND THE FOLLY OF IDOLATRY (44:6-23)

If the Babylonian Captivity accomplished anything, it managed to rid the people of Judah of the practice of idolatry once and for all. The generation that returns from Babylon has its share of problems, but idolatry is not one of them. Isaiah thus uses this lengthy satire to remind his readers of a lesson they have learned at great cost and to confirm them in their worship of the true God alone.

Verses 6-8 - God begins this prophecy by proclaiming His uniqueness. The characteristics that dominate this section of the prophetic message are God's sovereign rule over the nations in general and Israel in particular and His ability to predict the future - a characteristic that the end of the chapter will demonstrate in spectacular fashion.

Verse 9 - Isaiah begins his satiric denunciation of idolatry by putting the makers of idols, the defenders of idolatry, and the idols themselves in the same category - folly, ignorance, meaninglessness, shamefulness.

Verses 10-11 - Idolatry is folly, not only because idols do nothing to help those who worship them, but also because they subject the worshiper to God's judgment.

Verses 12-13 - The nature of the idol makes no difference; it doesn't matter whether it is forged or carved. While this point may seem obvious to us, it has not always been so clear. For example, during the Iconoclastic Controversy in the eighth and ninth centuries, many in the Eastern Orthodox Church argued that, while statues of Christ and the saints violated the Second Commandment, icons did not because they were two-dimensional. Isaiah makes it clear that such fine distinctions mean nothing to God; idolatry is idolatry in any form and rests under the divine condemnation.

Verses 14-17 - In these verses, which describe the work of a carpenter in carving an image, Isaiah's sarcasm reaches its height. He argues the folly of taking the same piece of wood, burning some of it for fuel, then taking what remains and, after applying one's own artistic skills, bowing down before it in worship. How can anyone think that such an image can provide help or deliverance?

Verses 18-20 - One can almost picture Isaiah smacking his forehead with his palm in frustration. If "Duh!" were an expression in his day, he probably would have used it here. Note, however, that he ascribes the foolish behavior of idolaters to blinded eyes and a deluded heart. If it is true that the Israelites of Isaiah's day would not listen to his message because of their blindness, how much more is the same thing true of those outside the nation of Israel who worship vanities? We thus find here a picture of man's hopelessness apart from the grace of God. Their sin blinds them, and only God can open their eyes.

There are several lessons we should take from this passage. The first is that, as was the case in Isaiah's day, the spiritual blindness of those who live apart from Christ can be remedied only by the grace of God. But in the same way that God declared His purpose through Isaiah that those who are outside of Israel would take upon themselves the name of Israel's God, so we have the promise

today that God has among those who are now blind His chosen ones, and that He will by His mercy bring them to Himself.

Secondly, we should note that, while Judah no longer worshiped idols after returning from Babylon, they continued to idolize created things in more subtle ways. In the prophecy of Haggai, for instance, we find that the people sought their own pleasures and neglected the work of the kingdom of God. Is this not also idolatry? And is it any less foolish than the grotesque picture painted by Isaiah in this chapter? We must always keep before us Isaiah's *reductio ad absurdum* of idolatry if we are to see with clear eyes the follies into which we so easily fall.

Verses 21-22 - These verses couple forgiveness with redemption. Israel's deliverance has not been because of their own effort, but because of God's grace. They are not idolaters because they are by nature different from others, but because God has swept their sin away and paid for it by His own initiative.

Verse 23 - God's redemption of His people will extend, not only to the nations beyond Israel, but to the entire created order, as Paul indicates in Romans 8:19-22.

THE REBUILDING OF JERUSALEM AND THE TEMPLE (44:24-28)

The poetry of the closing verses of the chapter brings together the themes of the prophecy into a bold, climactic prediction of God's deliverance in specific language that no false prophet would dare to use.

Verse 24 - God is the creator and redeemer of His people, as well as the creator of the whole universe. In these works He had no help, nor did He need any. The contrast with the creation myths of the Babylonian Empire is again apparent here.

Verse 25 - If God is the creator of all things, how can the false prophets who purport to speak for dead idols hope to read the signs of the heavens and the earth rightly? Does not the Lord control all these things? They may predict, but God controls, and He does things that they cannot possibly know.

Verses 26-28 - In contrast to the ignorance of the false prophets, those who speak the Word of the Lord speak truth. Isaiah then delivers a startling prophecy, indicating how God intends to restore His people. They will return to their land, rebuild their towns and villages, along with the city of Jerusalem (which at the time of the Babylonian Captivity was nothing but rubble) and the Temple itself. The most remarkable part of the prophecy is the naming of the specific man through whom these predictions would be brought to pass - Cyrus, the founder of the Medo-Persian Empire, born in 590 BC (about a century after Isaiah penned these words), who was to liberate the captives from Babylon around 535 BC. Though most so-called prophets are smart enough to couch their predictions in ambiguous language that continues to be argued about centuries after their deaths (e.g., Nostradamus), there have been a few foolish enough to make specific predictions that could be falsified (such as the prediction by the Jehovah's Witnesses that the world would end in 1975 in a nuclear holocaust). Isaiah's audacious prophecy was even more specific than that made by the Jehovah's Witnesses. The fact that it came true even as Isaiah said it would has become fodder for

skeptics who deny the possibility of predictive prophecy, but are they not foolish idolaters as well? Do they not idolize their own reason, insisting that man must be the measure of all things, and thus denying the very existence of the God who made them? To paraphrase Isaiah's words: "a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, 'Is not this thing in my *mind* a lie?'"

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How were the words of Isaiah 44:1-5 fulfilled, not only in the deliverance from captivity, but also in the work of Christ?
2. Why does Isaiah picture the worship of idols as foolishness? How are these same criticisms valid with regard to the kinds of idols people worship today?
3. How is Isaiah's ridicule of idolatry a demonstration of man's need for divine grace?
4. How does the last verse of the chapter demonstrate the power and wisdom of God? How does scholarly reaction to it demonstrate the truth of the critique of idolatry found earlier in the chapter?

STUDIES IN ISAIAH VIII

Isaiah 49

Today we will be considering the first of the Servant Songs to be included in our study. This is actually the second Servant Song found in Isaiah (the first is 42:1-9). As is true with the more familiar of these passages, this one points clearly to the work of the coming Messiah.

THE SERVANT'S MISSION OF DELIVERANCE (49:1-7)

In the first four verses of this section, the Servant himself speaks; then, the Lord speaks about the Servant. In reading these verses, one can easily understand the confusion that has arisen, particularly in Jewish circles where the New Testament fulfillment is rejected, concerning the very identity of the Servant about whom Isaiah speaks (remember the words of the Ethiopian eunuch to Philip - "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?").

Verse 1 - From the very beginning, the Servant's message is directed to the entire world. The first verse makes clear the fact that the plan relating to the Servant's work was established long ago, before the beginning of time.

Verse 2 - The Servant is here pictured as a weapon in the hand of the Lord - a sword that cuts in judgment and protection and an arrow that penetrates the strongest armor. The Servant is concealed until the time is right. These words are reminiscent of the obscurity in which Jesus came to earth, lived for thirty years, and indeed began His ministry. As the next verse notes, they are also true of the history of the nation of Israel, which certainly involves a narrative of something less than international prominence.

Verse 3 - This verse seems to make a direct connection between the Servant and the nation. Such statements have bolstered anti-Messianic interpretations of the Servant Songs among Jewish scholars ever since the rise of Christianity. Two things should be noted here. The first is that, in a sense, Israel is the Servant, chosen by God to display His splendor among the nations. One may easily draw a parallel between the Servant Songs and Isaiah 7-8 in this respect. Mahershalalhashbaz may have been the promised Child in some senses, but Christ fulfilled the prophecy of the virgin birth in a way that never could have been true of Isaiah's son. Similarly, Israel fulfilled certain aspects of the Servant Songs (see the complaint in the next verse, for instance), but could never fulfill them completely and was never intended to do so.

Secondly, we should note that Christ Himself was the fulfillment of what Israel was to be as the Chosen One of God. This is one possible explanation for the otherwise inexplicable connection that Matthew makes when he quotes Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15. As the True Israel, Christ is thus the complete and final fulfillment of the Servant prophesied by Isaiah.

Verse 4 - The complaint in this verse is certainly characteristic of Israel's feeling that God had deserted them in captivity, which we have seen before in our studies in Isaiah (cf. 40:27). Yet the expression of faith at the end of the verse reminds one of the way in which Christ entrusted His soul to God on the cross.

Verse 5 - Here the Servant is clearly distinguished from the nation, requiring the differentiation in the fulfillment of these prophecies noted above.

Verse 6 - The universal scope of the Servant's mission is here clearly enunciated. He is not only to restore Israel, but is also to bring salvation to all nations. Simeon quotes this verse in reference to Christ in Luke 2:32, while Paul and Barnabas apply it to their own missionary work in Acts 13:46-47. Thus we see in reality a threefold fulfillment here - Israel brings God's light to the Gentiles by bringing the Messiah into the world; Christ Himself is the prophesied Servant who accomplishes the work of salvation; and finally, the Church, the Body of Christ, carries the message of salvation to all nations, thus completing the mission described by Isaiah in this song.

Verse 7 - The Servant is again distinguished from Israel when He is described as one who is rejected by his own people and is subject to the depredations of earthly rulers, as Christ was to men such as Herod and Pilate. Yet, in the end, "every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

THE RETURN OF ISRAEL TO THE LAND (49:8-26)

We have seen messages of comfort to the captives in Babylon before, predicting their return to the land. This one contains some particularly striking imagery concerning God's love for His people and His intention to deliver them from their bondage.

Verses 8-9a - The promise of restoration here also has a broader application, as Paul's quotation of this passage in II Corinthians 6:2 indicates. God's promise of help to those who call upon Him in the day of salvation extends to all people.

Verse 9b-12 - The description here is of a journey for which every need has been provided - food, water, shelter, direction, even a smooth road to travel (cf. 40:4). Captives will return from every direction, including those who attempted to flee the Babylonian Captivity by hiding out in Egypt (Aswan, near the first cataract of the Nile, marks the boundary between Egypt and Nubia; a Jewish community had settled here in a place called Elephantine).

Verse 13 - Again, we see cosmic rejoicing at the deliverance of the people of God. The universe itself partakes of God's saving work.

Verse 14 - The familiar complaint again - Zion (the reference here is to the city of Jerusalem) fears that God has forgotten her.

Verses 15-16 - The two images in these verses speak of loving compassion and permanence. God can no more forget His children than a mother can forget her child (and, in an age where stories of mothers forgetting and neglecting their children are all too common, Isaiah reminds us that, even should a mother abdicate her maternal affections, God will never do so). The image of engraving on the hand speaks of a perpetual relationship (see 44:5, where the image is reversed). Is God actually speaking of Himself here as the servant of His people? As humiliating as it may sound, Jesus did describe Himself as one "who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Verse 17-18 - Because God loves His children, Israel will receive her children home again. The empty nest is empty no more.

Verses 19-20 - These verses speak of the prosperity of those who are restored to the land by God's power. They will grow in number. We know, of course, that not only did Israel prosper in some small way when they returned from the land, but also that God has promised to bring in multitudes that no man can number into the Kingdom He is constructing.

Verses 21-23 - The involvement of the Gentiles is made more explicit here. Not only do kings like Cyrus allow the captives to return, but the Gentiles themselves will be part of the great exodus into the land that God is preparing. They, too, will hope in the Lord.

Verses 24-26 - Of course, there will be those who resist, and these the Lord will destroy. They will be reduced to the greatest of extremities (pictured here in terms of cannibalism), but will ultimately acknowledge that the Lord is God.

Thus we again see God's sovereign lordship over the nations expressed in terms of both blessing and judgment. He is the one who infallibly brings salvation to those who belong to Him, while at the same time bringing glory to Himself through the destruction of those who fail to bow before Him.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The Servant Songs of Isaiah are clearly Messianic, but also to some extent apply to Israel as a nation. In verses 1-4, how do we see these dual referents? How did Christ fulfill these words in ways that Israel never could?
2. In what ways does Isaiah 49:5-7 draw clear distinctions between the Messiah and the nation of Israel?
3. In the first verse of the book of Acts, Luke implies that the narrative will describe what Jesus continued to do and teach through His Church. How is that connection illustrated in Isaiah 49:6?
4. Discuss the manifestations of the mercy and grace of God in Isaiah 49:8-23. How do we see fulfillment of these words today? Why should Christians today take comfort from these promises?

STUDIES IN ISAIAH IX

Isaiah 51:17-52:12

The passage before us today speaks of the removal of God's wrath from His people and the transfer of that wrath to Israel's enemies. In the words of the prophet we hear echoes of Christ's work of propitiation and the good news of the Gospel message. The two major sections of today's passage are marked off by the call for God's people to "Awake, awake!"

THE CUP OF GOD'S WRATH (51:17-23)

Verse 17 - The overarching image of this section of the book is that of inebriation. God has given to His people a cup to drink that has totally incapacitated them. They stagger like a drunken man unable to defend himself against his enemies.

Verse 18 - It was the responsibility of sons to care for their parents in their old age. Jerusalem, however, is like a mother with no sons left to care for her. The sons who should be caring for her are instead lying drunk in the street, unable to care even for themselves. Such was the condition of helplessness to which Judah was reduced prior to and during the Babylonian Captivity.

Verse 19 - The consequences of the Babylonian invasion were twofold - the deaths of many of Judah's sons in battle and the famine that resulted from the destruction of the economy, leaving survivors in a pitiful condition. The city of Jerusalem was left cast down and desolate with none to rebuild it.

Verse 20 - The image here shifts from drunkenness to that of a trapped animal. In actuality, the two are related - it is because of the drunkenness of the people that they are so easily trapped and carried off by the invaders.

Verse 21 - The drunkenness of which the prophet speaks has nothing to do with wine, but rather involves insensitivity to the Word of God - the blindness that God said would come when He called Isaiah to be His prophet. Those who fail to heed God's Word easily fall into the traps of their enemies and are unable to defend themselves.

Verses 22-23 - The reason for the wake-up call of verse 17 now becomes apparent. The cup of wrath is to be taken away from Judah and given to her tormentors. The Babylonians will now suffer the wrath of God, while Israel is to be delivered. Note the imagery of verse 23, which refers to a practice that is widely attested in the inscriptions of the Ancient Near East. Among the Assyrians in particular, the practice of trampling over the corpses of the vanquished was seen as a demonstration of invincibility.

THE GOOD NEWS OF SALVATION (52:1-12)

Verse 1 - Jerusalem is called to put on fresh clothing. The clothing of strength could refer to the armor used in battle, while the clothing of splendor could speak of priestly garments or kingly robes. We here see Jerusalem as victorious, a "kingdom of priests" (cf. I Peter 2:9).

Verse 2 - Instead of lying in the street to be trampled by her enemies, Zion now rises up and ascends the throne. The captivity is ended and the kingdom is established.

Verse 3 - This verse contains an interesting paradox. The terms “sold” and “redeemed” imply a financial transaction - “buying” and “buying back.” Yet those who “bought” Israel paid nothing to acquire her, and therefore are owed nothing when God’s people are given their freedom. In the light of the Servant Song that follows, of course, we may see here an allusion to the price paid for the redemption of God’s people - one that went far beyond monetary considerations.

Verses 4-5 - Tracing the history of the major captivities experienced by God’s people - first Egypt, then Assyria, and finally, by implication, Babylon. All were world powers that cared nothing for the God of Israel, and in fact blasphemed His Name in the process of enslaving His people.

Verse 6 - God’s Name is not to be taken lightly, however. When God delivers His people, the nations may not cease their blasphemies, but those who belong to Him will know that He is the Lord, and that He is faithful to what He has promised.

Verse 7 - The picture here is of a messenger crossing the mountains to bring good news of deliverance to Jerusalem. The good news is a simple one - “Your God reigns!” If God reigns, how can the blustering of the nations have any long-range significance? How can His people fear, no matter what their circumstances might be? When God reigns, the nations count for nothing and the deliverance of God’s people is inevitable. It should not surprise us, of course, that these words are seen by Paul in Romans 10:15 as a picture of the spread of the Gospel following the death and resurrection of Christ. If the fact that God reigns guarantees deliverance from Babylon for the Israelites, how much more does it guarantee the success of the Gospel as it is preached throughout the world?

Verse 8-9 - The message delivered by the herald brings rejoicing in Jerusalem despite its ruined condition. The return of the Lord to Jerusalem speaks not only of the rebuilding of the Temple following the Babylonian Captivity, but also of the coming of Christ to the city that He desires to take under His wings (cf. Haggai 2:9; Matthew 23:37).

Verse 10 - The deliverance of God’s people will be a witness to the nations concerning the power and mercy of the Lord. Though Isaiah does not speak of it here, we know from elsewhere in his prophecy that the nations will share in this deliverance, though some will know the power of God only in judgment.

Verse 11 - The picture here is of priests carrying the holy vessels of the Temple back to Jerusalem from captivity (II Chronicles 36:18 tells us that such vessels were carried off to Babylon, while Ezra 1:7 indicates that Cyrus allowed the captives to take these treasures back with them when they returned to rebuild the city and the Temple). The language here is alluded to by Paul in II Corinthians 6:17 when he commands the Christians in Corinth to separate themselves from idolatry. In our day, all are priests, and all are to remain clean from the taint of idolatry.

Verse 12 - The allusion here is to the Exodus from Egypt. Unlike that event, when God’s people leave Babylon, they will not flee in fear nor travel in haste. Instead, they will march openly

back to their own country. Like the Exodus, however, God will go with them, guarding them behind and before.

In reading this passage, we must be cognizant of its position in providing the context for the great fourth Servant Song. The deliverance described here - the redemption “without money” that restores God’s people to their rightful place - is accomplished by the suffering of the Servant, who takes the sins of God’s people on Himself. Their holiness comes only from Him, and He will establish the kingdom of peace in which they will flourish. What “good news” could be greater than this?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the meaning of the image of drunkenness in Isaiah 51:17-23. What does it say about the condition of the people of Judah in Isaiah’s day and in the days following the fall of Jerusalem? How is it an apt description of all who fall under divine judgment?
2. The messenger who reminds the people that their God reigns in Isaiah 52:7 is bringing a message of hope to captives. How are these words used to describe a much greater deliverance in Romans 10:15? What is the connection between the two passages?
3. In what ways does this passage provide an important context for the Servant Song that follows, which speaks of the sacrificial redemptive work of the Messiah?

STUDIES IN ISAIAH X

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Today we arrive at the best-known passage in the book of Isaiah - the fourth Servant Song. The incomprehensibility of the concepts in the passage in the light of Jewish religion in the time of Isaiah underscores the extent to which these verses point to Christ and Him alone as the fulfillment of the Suffering Servant. The fourth Servant Song, which is highly poetic, may be divided into five stanzas of three verses each.

THE EXALTATION OF THE SERVANT (52:13-15)

Verse 13 - The Lord is speaking here, praising the wisdom of His Servant. The threefold exaltation spoken of in this verse has by some commentators been connected to the resurrection, ascension, and heavenly session of Christ.

Verse 14 - The exaltation of the Servant is accentuated by reference to the degradation that preceded it. The depths from which he is to be lifted up involve disfiguring beyond human recognition. Note that such disfigurement can be the result of spiritual as well as physical suffering - the suffering of Christ on the Cross was preceded by the agony in Gethsemane.

Verse 15 - Sprinkling was a priestly function and was incorporated into cleansing ceremonies. Note that the cleansing accomplished by the Servant involves Gentiles as well as Israel. Notice, too, that the latter part of the verse involves an inversion of the commission given to Isaiah in 6:9-10. Here, people will hear and understand what they have not been told rather than rejecting what has been plainly communicated to them. What does this mean? Perhaps that even those who are not direct recipients of God's revelation in Christ will be converted as they accept His work by faith.

THE REJECTION OF THE SERVANT (53:1-3)

Verse 1 - Note the shift to plural pronouns at the beginning of chapter 53. Who is speaking? Perhaps the Gentiles who have been the recipients of the Servant's "sprinkling" are in view here. The speakers note that what has been revealed here is beyond belief. How could such an exalted one be disfigured so that men are appalled by him? How can such suffering and exaltation be coupled in the experience of a single man? John relates these words to the rejection of Jesus by His own people in John 12:37-38.

Verse 2 - The description of the childhood and humanity of the Servant clearly matches those of Christ as He grew up in obscurity in Nazareth, and even as He began His ministry as one who had no standing among the religious leaders of the day. Note, too, the connection with 11:1 - the Servant is the root growing out of dry ground, the Branch growing out of a dead stump.

Verse 3 - The Servant is rejected by those among whom He lives. They see nothing of who He really is, but look only on the outer appearance. He was familiar with suffering, not only because He suffered, but also because He moved among those who suffered.

THE ATONING SACRIFICE OF THE SERVANT (53:4-6)

Verse 4 - Here we arrive at the center of the poem. These verses explain the paradox of an exalted one who suffers. The reason is that His suffering is vicarious - it is on behalf of others that He suffers, not because of His own sins. A few things should be noted at this point. First of all, Jewish commentators who wish to interpret the Servant Songs in reference to Israel as a nation point to the phrasing here and note that the Gentiles are speaking. Thus what the verse says is that Israel suffers for the sins of the Gentiles, though the Gentiles view her suffering as an indication of God's judgment against her (this interpretation is rather difficult to sustain when one arrives at verse 9, however).

In applying this verse to Christ, we are reminded of the behavior of those who witnessed the crucifixion. They mocked Christ, telling Him to call out to God to save Him. One is also reminded of the Pharisees who, earlier in Christ's ministry, thought Him demon-possessed, and thus "stricken by God . . . and afflicted" in a different sense.

Finally, we should note that the idea of substitutionary atonement was a familiar one in the ancient world, but only in very different forms than pictured here. There were animal sacrifices, of course, but these were largely viewed as propitiatory rather than substitutionary - the wrath of the gods was averted through the shedding of blood, but the animal was not thought to have died in the place of the guilty party. One other interesting custom did exist, however, and that was the idea of the substitute monarch. When omens foretold disaster (the appearance of a comet, for example), the king was often sent into hiding, where he went through a series of purification rituals, and was replaced on the throne by a substitute, often a poor man or an idiot. This substitute would be treated with royal honors, wined and dined, clothed in the best the kingdom had to offer, and then would be killed at the end of his "reign." The idea was that the gods who had pronounced the curse would be satisfied with the death of the imposter and would cancel the doom intended for the real king and his people. This is the closest the ancient world got to understanding the concept of substitutionary atonement, though such a practice falls far short of the true nature of the work of the Servant.

Verse 5 - The alternation between "he" and "us" in this verse shows the extent of the substitutionary work performed by the Servant. "He" was pierced, crushed, punished, and wounded, while the sins, transgressions, and resultant peace and healing belonged to "us."

Verse 6 - This verse underscores the utter unfairness of what is being described. The picture of the shepherd in the literature of the Old Testament is one of peace and safety, yet the speakers in this verse wander willfully away from their protector. He, in turn, takes on Himself the sin of His wandering sheep and receives the punishment due them. The connection with Jesus' words in John 10 is unmistakable at this point. Note also the language of Peter in I Peter 2:25.

THE REJECTION OF THE SERVANT (53:7-9)

While the rejection of the Servant spoken of in the second stanza was primarily associated with His birth and early life in obscurity, the fourth stanza directly addresses the suffering of the Cross.

Verse 7 - The shepherd now becomes the sacrificial lamb (again, echoes of John 10). We think here of Jesus' silence when on trial before the Sanhedrin, Herod, and Pilate, and the words of I Peter 2:23.

Verse 8 - After an unfair trial, the Servant is cut off, leaving behind Him no descendants. Note that dying childless was considered a terrible curse, so much so that the law of levirate marriage was instituted to keep the family name alive in such circumstances. His death is, again, on behalf of His people. Note that verses 7-8 were quoted by the Ethiopian eunuch when Philip joined him in his chariot in Acts 8:32-33. When the eunuch asked of whom the prophet speaks, Philip "began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus."

Verse 9 - This verse would have been a real paradox to the readers of Isaiah's day and is equally baffling for commentators who would deny that Christ is the referent of this prophecy. The circumstances of Christ's death and burial, however, make the meaning of this verse clear - He was crucified with two thieves and was buried in a rich man's tomb (Matthew 27:57-60). The end of this verse is also applied to Christ in I Peter 2:22.

THE EXALTATION OF THE SERVANT (53:10-12)

Verse 10 - The crushing of the Servant is part of God's divine plan; it is also God's plan that the Servant will return to life and "see his offspring." The untold millions who are added to God's people as a result of the work of Christ are the offspring that He never had in His earthly life.

Verse 11 - The suffering is an essential prelude to the glory that will follow, because it is by faith in that work of suffering ("his knowledge" = "knowledge of him") that many will be declared righteous.

Verse 12 - The closing verse of the Servant Song reminds us of several New Testament passages. First of all, the glory that results from the suffering of Christ is reminiscent of Philippians 2:9. In addition, the picture of the Servant returning victorious with the spoils of battle reminds one of Ephesians 4:8, where Christ gives gifts to His people. The song closes with the reminder that the Servant not only made atonement for His people, but also makes intercession for them (cf. Hebrews 7:25). What a glorious savior we have!

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Go through each of the five stanzas of the fourth Servant Song and discuss how it was fulfilled in Christ.
2. Why should we not expect to find multiple fulfillments of passage, particularly with regard to Israel, as Jewish commentators often argued?
3. How did the ancient world's concepts of substitutionary atonement differ from that found in this passage, and indeed in the work of Christ that fulfilled it?
4. Shepherds in the ancient world were viewed in different ways, not all of them complimentary. How does Isaiah 53:6 illustrate the way in which the image of the shepherd is to be applied to the Messiah? How does the New Testament use of the image confirm this?

5. Discuss how Philippians 2:5-11 serves as a parallel to the fourth Servant Song.

STUDIES IN ISAIAH XI

Isaiah 55

If Isaiah 53 gives the clearest Old Testament picture of the Gospel with regard to the atoning work of Christ, today's chapter speaks of the free offer of that Good News to all who will come. The chapter consists of three invitations and two assurances.

AN INVITATION TO DRINK (55:1-2a)

Verse 1 - The chapter begins with the familiar cry of the street vendor selling his wares. But there is something strange about his cry - he is offering the best goods free of charge! The water that is essential for life, the wine that makes glad the heart of man, and the milk that nourishes the bones is all to be had for no cost. This is the invitation of Jehovah to His wayward people, and it is the call of the Gospel today as well.

Verse 2a - Next we see a hint of rebuke. God's people, instead of taking what He offers them freely, toil and spend for that which has far less value. In the context of the chapter, these verses are probably addressed to the captives in Babylon who have no desire to return to the land. After all, they are comfortable, have made lives for themselves, established homes and businesses - why should they undertake the risk of moving to a deserted land? Certainly we know the temptation among God's people today to *settle* - not only to plant their roots in the world, but also to be satisfied with the meager offerings found there, when all the time God holds out incomparable riches. The free gift of the Gospel can only be appropriated by faith - only those who believe God's description of the new life will be willing to turn away from everything else in order to gain it.

AN INVITATION TO LISTEN (55:2b-5)

Verses 2b-3a - The good things of God's promise come through *listening*. It is the Word that is the source of God's blessing to His people. We know now, of course, that the Word is personified in the Suffering Servant who gave His life for the sins of His people - that same Suffering Servant we studied last week.

Verses 3b-5 - The pronouns again indicate a double referent; these words speak to the nation and to the representative of that nation, the Servant. He is the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant and the king who will rule all nations (Paul connects this to the resurrection of Christ when he quotes verse 3 in Acts 13:34). Those who follow Him will summon the nations, and His kingdom will expand among the Gentiles. These promises we have seen before in Isaiah, and we know them to be fulfilled in the growth of the Church throughout the world. Part of the blessing to which God's thirsty people are called is the privilege of participating in the ingathering of the nations into the kingdom of the Messiah.

AN INVITATION TO SEEK (55:6-9)

Verse 6 - The call of the Gospel requires a response of faith. God promises to receive those who seek Him, but they must seek Him while He may be found. As Paul says in II Corinthians 6:2 when commenting on Isaiah 49:8, "Now is the day of salvation."

Verse 7 - Faith is not faith unless it is accompanied by repentance. He who turns toward God must at the same time turn away from evil. Note that the evil from which he must turn involves both ways and thoughts - both outward behavior and the inner life. The one who turns has the assurance that God will pardon freely, even as He has already promised to nourish freely.

Verses 8-9 - In the ancient world, there was thought to be both continuity and discontinuity between the people and their gods. The gods were stronger than the people and were immortal, but in many ways they shared the characteristics of those who worshiped them. Statements such as the ones in these verses, in which the gods are said to be inscrutable and their councils mysterious to the minds of man, are found in other ancient literature as well. Yet the inscrutability of the gods, which became for most ancient civilizations a way of justifying what seemed too often to be arbitrary divine behavior, here is transformed into a justification for God's incredible mercy. Though it is true that His dark providences are beyond our understanding, as Job finally learned, it is also true that His grace is beyond comprehension. It is His mercy at which His children should marvel, not at His justice. To paraphrase Spurgeon, the difficulty is not to explain "Esau have I hated," but to comprehend "Jacob have I loved." This is a God worth seeking!

AN ASSURANCE OF FULFILLMENT (55:10-11)

Here we have a picture of the water cycle as an illustration of the blessing God sends through His Word. Like Jesus' Parable of the Sower, we see that the Word, when it falls on the fertile soil of a believing heart, will produce much fruit. God here gives the assurance that His Word will not fail. The promises He has given to His people will surely come to pass, whether in connection with the return to the land or in relationship to the saving work of the Suffering Servant.

AN ASSURANCE OF PROSPERITY (55:12-13)

Verse 12 - The chapter ends with a joyous picture of the procession back to the land from Babylon. Not only will the road be smoothed for their passage, but the entire creation will rejoice at the salvation of the children of God (cf. Romans 8:19).

Verse 13 - The end result of God's liberation of His people will be the reversal of the curse. Thorns and briars will be replaced by pleasant and fruitful trees. God's name will be glorified and His kingdom will endure forever. What a beautiful picture on which to meditate!

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do people today choose to labor for what God offers them for free?
2. How do the words of Isaiah 55 prefigure the spread of the Gospel through the ministry of the Church?
3. How does the passage demonstrate the truth that faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin? Why is one useless without the other?
4. Isaiah 55:8-9 are often used to justify the incomprehensibility of God. Toward what incomprehensible behavior on God's part are they specifically directed?

5. Isaiah 55:10-11 are often applied to the certainty of the preaching of the Gospel bearing fruit. What did these words mean to the original readers? Does this mean that all preaching today will be fruitful?

STUDIES IN ISAIAH XII

Isaiah 61

As we conclude our studies in the book of Isaiah, we will be looking at a passage about which commentators have often debated. The fact that Christ quotes the beginning of the chapter during His sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke 4 makes it clear that He is the fulfillment of the prophecy found in the chapter, as He clearly is the fulfillment of the Servant Songs, but does that mean that this passage constitutes a fifth Servant Song? While some have argued that it does, most commentators would not classify it as such. Ultimately, it makes little difference in our interpretation of the chapter; the links to the ministry of Christ in the New Testament and to other parts of Isaiah's prophecy exist in any case.

THE YEAR OF JUBILEE (61:1-3)

The prophet here speaks in the first person, describing the message he has been given by the Lord. Note several things about the message:

Verse 1 - The prophet speaks in the power of the Spirit of God. This characteristic links him with the Messianic king, the Branch (11:2), and with the Servant (42:1). It is therefore not surprising that this passage should ultimately point us to Christ, as He Himself makes clear when He quotes Isaiah 61:1-2a in Luke 4:18-19.

The recipients of the good news are described as the poor, the brokenhearted, captives and prisoners. This brings to mind a common practice among newly-crowned kings in the Ancient Near East. Often, in celebrating their accession to the throne, kings would announce a general amnesty, forgiving debts and freeing debtors from prison (cf. Jeremiah 34:8-10, where the amnesty was short-lived - see verse 11). Cynics would note that this would gain them considerable popularity (except among creditors) at very little personal cost. But the good news proclaimed in verse 1 goes beyond royal public relations stunts. The care for the poor and brokenhearted demonstrates a reign of justice and compassion, and certainly corresponds with the kingdom Jesus was proclaiming when He applied this verse to Himself.

Verse 2 - The beginning of verse 2 links our passage with the Year of Jubilee legislation in Leviticus 25, though the obvious immediate application was to the return from captivity in Babylon. The Year of Jubilee, which was to take place every fifty years, was a time when slaves were freed and land was returned to its original owners. The purpose was to maintain a system of social justice through equitable land distribution. Because land was wealth in the economy of that day, wealthy men often took advantage of the poor by purchasing their land. The Year of Jubilee ensured that such purchases would not produce a permanent underclass of landless peasants permanently in thrall to a few wealthy landowners. There is no evidence that Israel ever practiced this aspect of the Mosaic law. The new king announced by Isaiah, however, will rule a kingdom characterized by freedom and justice. This justice will not only involve freedom for the oppressed, but also vengeance against the oppressors (again, the immediate application to the destruction of Babylon by Cyrus prior to the release of the Israelites).

Many commentators have noted that Jesus ends His quotation of Isaiah 61 in the middle of verse 2 and have concluded that His intention was to separate “the year of the Lord’s favor” from “the day of vengeance of our God.” In other words, He was distinguishing between the purposes of His first and second advents - the first was for the purpose of deliverance, while the second would be a coming in judgment. While this is certainly possible, and while the division of the verse certainly fits the two advents of Christ, we should also note that Jesus sometimes quoted part of a passage in order to identify Himself with the whole (see His use of Psalm 22:1 while on the cross).

Verse 3 - In speaking about how the coming king will comfort those who grieve and mourn, this verse sets forth three contrasting pairs of ideas - crowns, oil, and clothing. A crown worn at a celebration will replace ashes on the heads of those who mourn (for their sorrow? for their sin?), perfumed oil will replace the cleansing done before a funeral, and festive clothing will replace mourners’ garments. The closing reference to “oaks of righteousness” is reminiscent of the description of the godly man in Psalm 1:3.

When we look at the application of these verses to Christ, we can easily identify His care for the poor and downtrodden, His release of those enslaved by sin, and His ultimate judgment of those who oppose His reign. The fact that Jesus’ listeners were offended by the fact that He claimed this passage for Himself indicates, among other things, that they clearly recognized Isaiah’s prophecy as Messianic - the local carpenter’s son simply didn’t have what it took to claim the title of Messiah, to their way of thinking. When Jesus went on to identify His listeners as those who were to be judged because of their rejection of the good news of which Isaiah spoke, they were ready to throw Him off the nearest cliff. What a way to respond to good news! Is today’s world really so different, though?

PRIESTS AND SONS (61:4-9)

Verse 4 - Again, we see a reference to the rebuilding of the land following the Babylonian Captivity. This is exactly what the returning captives did, rebuilding not only Jerusalem and the Temple, but also other cities, and restarting the agrarian economy by replanting fields and vineyards.

Verses 5-6 - Here, however, we see a picture that goes beyond the return of the Israelites from Babylon. After their return, they continued under the rule of foreigners - first the Persians, then the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great, then the Seleucids following the dissolution of Alexander’s empire, and finally, after less than a century of independence under the Hasmoneans, under the rule of Rome. What is described here, however, is a kingdom of priests - a nation of people who are supported by the labor of others while they engage in the work of the Lord. Peter applies this picture to the Church in I Peter 2:9. It is therefore the Church that enjoys the fulfillment of this promise; not surprisingly, given the frequent theme of the expansion of God’s kingdom to the Gentiles in Isaiah, Jews and Gentiles alike partake of this promised priestly kingdom.

Verse 7 - The reference to the double portion in this verse speaks of the law of primogeniture, by which the oldest son would receive a double portion of the father’s inheritance. God’s people are thus pictured as enjoying the privileges of sonship. Instead of being slaves, God’s people will now be sons and heirs to the wealth of their Father.

Verses 8-9 - The blessing God gives to His people is the consequence both of His justice and His faithfulness. He will not allow the wicked to go unpunished forever, nor will He renege on the promises He made to His people in the covenant made with Abraham. The result of this is that God will be glorified as all see the blessings He pours out on those who belong to Him. If we are indeed heirs of this promise as the passage indicates, do we live in such a way that all around can see the blessings that God showers upon those He loves? Do we, in fact, act like a blessed people, or do we complain about the blessings we think we should have but don't while ignoring the incalculable blessings God has given us in Christ?

THE JOY OF ZION (61:10-11)

Verse 10 - What are those blessings? The response of God's people in verse 10 should be our own. We see here a celebrant who is clothed with righteousness and salvation; the righteousness of Christ, not our own, is the basis for the salvation we enjoy and in which we rejoice. The picture of the bride and bridegroom preparing for the wedding celebration is reminiscent of passages such as Ephesians 5:25-27 and Revelation 21:2.

Verse 11 - The image of the fruitful garden reminds us of Isaiah 55:13. The fruit that springs from the fertile soil of God's people is the fruit of righteousness and praise, as a redeemed people devote themselves to the praise of their God and Savior.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the ways in which Isaiah 61:1-3 were fulfilled on the earthly ministry of Christ. To what extent should these verses be understood in material terms, and to what extent should they be understood spiritually?
2. Jesus quoted the beginning of this chapter at the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke 4:18-19. Why did His hearers respond the way they did? What does this tell you about their understanding of Isaiah's words? About their comprehension of who Jesus was? In what ways do people tend to respond in the same way today?
3. Why can Isaiah 61:5-6 not apply to the Israelites returning from Babylon? In what ways is it fulfilled in the Church? In what sense is it true today?
4. Verses 8-9 of this chapter speak of the testimonial value of God's blessings on His people. In what ways may that blessing be seen today? To what extent does the world acknowledge God as the source of those blessings? Why do they fail to do so?