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ISAIAH'S THEME OF JUDGMENT AND REDEMPTION
PREACHED TO THE CONGREGATION OF
FIRST CALVARY BAPTIST CHURCH

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ISAIAH'S THEME OF JUDGMENT AND REDEMPTION
PREACHED TO THE CONGREGATION OF
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Dedicated to my wife and love of my life,
Leigh Ann

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE	vii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Defining Biblical Theology	1
Applying the Concepts of Biblical Theology to the Project	4
Familiarity with the Literature of Isaiah	7
Rationale for the Congregation of First Calvary Baptist Church	11
Selected Passages for a Sermon Series from the Book of Isaiah	15
2. SERMON 1: HOPE IN THE FACE OF JUDGMENT	21
Isaiah 4:2-6	22
Hope in the Branch	23
Hope in Judgment	27
Power of Hope	30
Conclusion	32
3. SERMON 2: THRESHOLD TREMORS	34
Background of Isaiah	35
A Shaking Threshold	37
A Shaken Isaiah	41
Unshaken People	44
Conclusion: Are We Shaken?	46
4. SERMON 3: GLORY OF A JUST GOD	48
Coming Destruction	50

Chapter	Page
Cause	55
God's Position	57
Our Response	59
Conclusion	61
5. SERMON 4: COMFORT IN THE FACE OF DISASTER	63
Investigation	64
Failure of Hezekiah	65
Confrontation with Hezekiah	67
Faithfulness of God	70
Message of God	75
Conclusion	77
6. SERMON 5: GOD'S SELF OBLIGATION	79
God Is Not Obligated	80
God Obligates Himself	86
Conclusion	92
7. SERMON 6: BUY WITHOUT PRICE	94
Lead Up to Isaiah 55	95
Invitation to Come Drink	97
Global Appeal	100
Urgent Response by Anyone Who Would Accept the Servant's Work	103
Jesus Preaching Isaiah 55	106
Conclusion	108
8. SERMON 8: VINEYARD WARNING	110
God Is Rejected by His Own Vineyard	112
God Is Going to Burn the Whole Vineyard Down	117

	Page
One Little Cluster Found	118
Vineyard Warning: Are You in the Chosen Cluster?	120
Conclusion	122
EPILOGUE	123
BIBLIOGRAPHY	126

PREFACE

I have been perplexed by an inability to wrap my mind around Isaiah. This difficulty was due, in large part, to an insufficient understanding of a theme or themes to bind the book together. John Oswald convincingly provided a central theme to the book of Isaiah: redemption through judgment. This very same theme was fleshed out to great extent by James Hamilton in *Salvation through Judgment*. Hamilton's book was coupled with numerous lectures as he served as the professor overseeing the Biblical Theology concentration at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, of which my Doctor of Ministry was a part. I am grateful for both of these men and their abilities to synthesize such a complex work as the book of Isaiah.

Placing the theme of redemption through salvation in the context of Isaiah was made easier by the work of my supervising professor, Dr. Duane Garrett. His analysis of the literary structure was certainly helpful. For me, Dr. Garrett's best contribution was his example of how to approach biblical theology as he shared insights into the book of Isaiah as a biblical theologian.

The support of my local churches, First Calvary Baptist Church and Woodlawn Baptist Church, have been invaluable during this process. The focus of the project centered upon seven sermons that were received by First Calvary with a sense of interest and enthusiasm. Above all others, one person has been especially supportive and encouraging, my wonderful wife, Leigh Ann. The only influence greater than her is

Jesus, around whom this project is centered, and it is in his service that I have undertaken this endeavor.

Mitch Evans

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Bible is an irreducible complexity. The term “irreducible complexity” is generally applied to biological systems because if they were to be reduced they would fail. The very same principle is true of Scripture. No passage of Scripture can stand on its own and convey the message of the whole Bible. Therefore, Scripture must be understood as a whole unit. Biblical theology is the means by which the whole of Scripture is studied and understood.

Defining Biblical Theology

Biblical theology must be defined well in order to understand the purpose of pursuing a biblical theological approach to Scripture. The definition of biblical theology includes a clear concise statement about the nature of the discipline, the contrasts between biblical theology and other approaches to examining Scripture, and a description of the methods by which biblical theological conclusions are developed. Upon establishing these elements, the purpose of biblical theology is correctly surmised.

Biblical theology is the method by which theological conclusions are derived from scriptural passages by first determining the original context and significance and then the relationship of the given passage to the whole of scripture. As a field of study, biblical theology consists of numerous parts. J. I. Packer speaks to the varied nature of the elements that make up biblical theology:

Biblical theology is the umbrella-name for those disciplines that explore the unity of the Bible, delving into the contents of the books, showing the links between them,

and pointing up the ongoing flow of the revelatory and redemptive process that reached its climax in Jesus Christ.¹

And it must be stressed that biblical theology centers upon the redemptive or saving plan of God. Graeme Goldsworthy defines the function of biblical theology as primarily “a way of understanding the Bible as a whole, so that we can see the plan of salvation as it unfolds step by step.”²

It is helpful to clearly and concisely state what biblical theology is and also to state what it is not. Biblical theology is not exegesis or systematic theology. Biblical theology utilizes exegesis and is the basis for systematic theology, but it is a distinct discipline in and of itself. D. A. Carson describes the function of biblical theology as a bridge. He comments that biblical theology is a “bridge discipline between responsible exegesis and responsible systematic theology (even though each of these inevitably influences the other two).”³

Students of Scripture utilize many methods in order to deduce theological understanding. However, the tools chosen for the task depend largely upon the goal to be reached. For instance, Williamson writes that “biblical theology is principally concerned with the overall theological message of the whole Bible.”⁴ In order to achieve this objective, biblical theology “must work with the mutual interaction of the literary, historical, and theological dimensions of the various corpora, and with the inter-relationships of these within the whole canon of Scripture.”⁵ James Hamilton has further

¹J. I Packer, foreword to Edmund Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1988), 8.

²Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 29.

³D. A. Carson, quoted in Edward Klink and Darian Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), loc. 1174, Kindle.

⁴Paul Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 17.

⁵Ibid.

nanced the literary, historical, and theological through a method known as the “interpretive perspective.” Since this terminology is unique to Hamilton it begs the question:

What is an “interpretive perspective?” It’s the frame of assumptions and presuppositions, associations and identifications, truths and symbols that are taken for granted as an author or speaker describes the world and the events that take place in it.⁶

From these elements, Hamilton sets the stage for a method to be adopted by an individual hoping to understand Scripture from a biblical theological perspective. First, biblical theology seeks to identify the way “biblical authors have presented their understanding of earlier Scripture.”⁷ Additionally, the biblical authors’ understanding of redemptive history is key in developing a biblical theology. Lastly, “One must seek to discover the way biblical authors have presented their understanding of . . . the events they are describing, recounting, celebrating, or addressing in narratives, poems, proverbs, letters, and apocalypses.”⁸

The purpose for studying Scripture from a biblical theological perspective is multifold. The foremost purpose is to consider each concept, theme, or book from Scripture “ultimately in terms of how it contributes to and advances the Bible’s meta-narrative, typically understood in terms of a salvation history that progresses towards and culminates in Jesus Christ.”⁹ Biblical theology also functions as a hermeneutical tool Goldsworthy writes, “Biblical theology enables us to relate any Bible story to the whole message of the Bible.”¹⁰ And biblical theology must be practiced as a hermeneutical tool

⁶James Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), loc. 123, Kindle.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 17.

¹⁰Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 22.

in sermon development. For instance, a sermon developed from the Old Testament should employ a biblical theology model because “biblical theology shows the relationship of all parts of the Old Testament to the person and work of Jesus Christ and, therefore to the Christian.”¹¹

The discipline of biblical theology is rightly understood as the method by which theological conclusions are derived from scriptural passages, by first determining the original context and significance, and then the relationship of a given passage to the whole of Scripture. By establishing this definition of biblical theology, the purpose of utilizing this method in the study of Scripture becomes evident. The purpose is to demonstrate how a specific passage, concept, or theme ultimately contributes to and advances the salvation history of Jesus Christ.

Applying the Concepts of Biblical Theology to the Project

All stories have a plotline. Good stories have a plotline that thickens and twists as it unfolds. The plotline of Scripture has one of its most ironic twists within the book of Isaiah, which is the focus of this project. The twist is found in the message of hope in the face of great judgment that the prophet Isaiah is commissioned to proclaim. Barry Webb states this proposition very succinctly: “Paradoxically, salvation emerges out of judgment and is possible only because of it.”¹² Isaiah is not telling his audience to hope that they might avoid judgment, but ironically that hope will come through judgment. Isaiah explains that Israel will go through judgment and because of this judgment they will be redeemed. Judgment has become the conduit by which the hope of future redemption comes. The only way to preach a series of sermons conveying this theme from Isaiah is through a biblical theological approach.

¹¹Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 23.

¹²Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles Wings*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 31.

Elements of Biblical Theology to Be Utilized

A change in plotline is only a twist if the audience, in this case the Israelites, already had an expected trajectory. John Oswalt explains, “The Israelites, like the rest of us, tended to believe that hope only lay in the escape from judgment.”¹³ Just as earlier Scripture provides the setting for the ironic twist found in Isaiah, so also the portions of Scripture that follow Isaiah demonstrate how this twist in the plot leads to the climactic moment of Jesus’ work on the cross. Therefore, a sermon series must identify Isaiah’s place in the metanarrative of Scripture. Upon establishing the storyline of Scripture, it is crucial to see how Isaiah interacts with this metanarrative by using quotations, allusions, imagery, typology, and ultimately patterns.

Quotations and allusions are portions of Isaiah in which the author has directly or indirectly referenced another specific portion of Scripture. The book of Isaiah is confronting a disobedient people on the brink of exile, and many of the rebukes of Isaiah are born out of the warnings found in the Pentateuch. Isaiah 11:11 is an example of a Pentateuch warning: “In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of his people.” This verse alludes to Deuteronomy 30:3: “Then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.”

Imagery, however, requires slightly more explanation and thus an example is a helpful starting point. The Bible repeatedly uses tree imagery:

Isaiah talks about the Messiah as a shoot from the stump of Jesse. The judgment on the garden God planted in Isaiah 5, the tree chopped down in Isaiah 6, and the shoot from Jesse’s stump in Isaiah 11 are all telling the story of Israel. The nation has broken the covenant God made with them at Sinai so they will be exiled from the land.¹⁴

¹³John Oswalt, “Isaiah: Short Course in Biblical Theology,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 39 (2004): 61.

¹⁴Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*, loc. 626.

The complex notion of the Messiah coming forth out of judgment is demonstrated through an illustration of a tree. This illustration of complex ideas is the nature of imagery.

Hamilton writes, “The images the Bible uses are meant to give real-world illustrations of these abstract concepts.”¹⁵

Imagery is similar to, but unique from, typology. Typology “works like literary foreshadowing”¹⁶ but is more than a literary device, for “it may never introduce into the Old Testament text a principle which was not already present and intelligible to its Old Testament readers.”¹⁷ The helpfulness, however, is found in the foreshadowing aspect. Hamilton explains, “As people notice the type of thing God has done and interpret these patterns in light of the promises God has made, they begin to expect God to act in the future as he has acted in the past.”¹⁸ For instance, through an act of judgment, Isaiah’s unclean lips are purified and “[his] guilt is taken away, and [his] sin atoned for” (Isa 6:7). In this way, Isaiah becomes a type of Israel, foreshadowing the purifying judgment Israel will experience in order to have their guilt removed and their sins atoned for.

Finally, Isaiah makes use of patterns, and while the patterns are distinct from typology, they do function in a typological manner. James Hamilton makes this connection: “The repetition of the pattern creates the impression that this is what typically happens, which causes people to notice it and expect more of it.”¹⁹ Thus, Isaiah functions as a microcosm of the larger metanarrative, which encompasses all of Scripture. The pattern demonstrated in Isaiah becomes a reflection of what to expect on a grander

¹⁵Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*, loc. 611.

¹⁶Ibid., loc. 727.

¹⁷Mark Karlberg, “The Significance of Israel in Biblical Typology,” *Journal Evangelical Theological Society* 31 (1988): 260.

¹⁸Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*, loc. 730.

¹⁹Ibid.

scale: “The Bible’s metanarrative—creation, sin, exile, restoration.”²⁰ Therefore, the use of patterns is a crucial tool in order to understand the necessity of exilic judgment as the means to reach restorative redemption.

Through these elements of biblical theology, metanarrative, quotations and allusions, typology, imagery, and patterns, a reader is able to see the manner in which Isaiah enters into the storyline of Scripture, and furthermore, the manner by which the plotline of this story is ironically twisted. Therefore, in order to depict the book of Isaiah’s central theme of judgment being a conduit for the hope of redemption, biblical theology is an indispensable method. When Isaiah is approached in a biblical theological manner, the plot-thickening twist of judgment being the means of hope arises to the surface and ultimately leads a congregation to better see the redemption found in Christ.

Familiarity with the Literature of Isaiah

The information age has become famous for an abundance of data with very little filter, therefore establishing parameters by which information is ranked according to what is most helpful is crucial. Throughout the history of the church, an overwhelming number of volumes have been written about the book of Isaiah. The number of volumes written about this single book makes deciphering the most pertinent information a difficult task. In order to discern which reference materials to consult, some parameters are necessary. The literature falls within four categories: biblical theology, exegetical analysis of Isaiah, theological analysis of Isaiah, and literature concerning preaching from a biblical theological vantage point.

In order to approach the text of Isaiah in a biblical theological manner, it is necessary to clearly define biblical theology and have a starting point for how to understand the elements of biblical theology. James Hamilton’s *What is Biblical*

²⁰James Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), loc. 972, Kindle.

Theology? serves this very purpose of providing guidance and a definition. Isaiah uses many of the tools of biblical theology as he records his prophetic word.²¹

Paul House's work *Old Testament Theology* serves to further the understanding of Isaiah from a biblical theological method by highlighting theological emphases of Isaiah.²² He also breaks down the book of Isaiah into five major sections identifying their themes and how they relate to the book of Isaiah and Scripture as a whole.

John Oswalt's two-volume work *The Book of Isaiah* is a critical starting point for an exegetical analysis of the book of Isaiah.²³ Oswalt's position on authorship is unique in evangelical critical scholarship in that he upholds a single author, Isaiah, without the work of a later redactor. For the purposes of biblical theology, this distinction is critical because the all-too-common approach to Isaiah has been to divide the book of Isaiah into three primary sections, each boasting a different author. As Oswalt's work portrays, to divide the book in this manner is to sever the interconnectedness of the theological themes that span all sixty-six chapters. One of these interconnected themes is also a central theme in the book of Isaiah: the hope that "judgment may become the vehicle for redemption."²⁴ Oswalt goes so far as to show that the literary structure of Isaiah centers upon this theme. This theme is carried throughout his exegesis of Scripture in verse-by-verse fashion. Despite his thorough exegetical approach, the work in the original languages is almost nonexistent.

²¹Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*.

²²Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

²³John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986); John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998).

²⁴Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah 1-39*, 39.

Alec Motyer undertakes the monumental task of writing a commentary, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, on the book of Isaiah in a single volume.²⁵ His single volume commentary is indicative of his approach to Isaiah, for he views Isaiah as being written by a single author and he views arguments to the contrary as being invalid. The lack of validity is based upon the notion that it is not the role of modern scholarship to determine the prehistory; instead “it is the task of scholarship to pursue holistic study.”²⁶ In contrast to an approach that views the text as a compilation of multiple authors, his holistic approach draws different conclusions. By demonstrating the interconnectivity of the different portions of Isaiah to each other, Motyer’s single volume work has become indispensable.

Because of the sheer size of the book of Isaiah and the approach of commentators to divide the book on perceived authorial lines, most volumes only cover a few chapters. Therefore, it is necessary to compile a series of commentaries to represent the whole text of Isaiah. The disadvantage to many of these works is their disinterest in a holistic approach to the book of Isaiah. The advantage is their attention to detail, such as original languages, which the before-mentioned commentaries address only at a minimal level.

Hugh Williamson’s addition, *Isaiah 1-5*,²⁷ to the scholarship on Isaiah in the International Critical Commentary Series helps to facilitate Oswalt’s lack of original language analysis. Each major section of Williamson’s commentary begins with a two-part section addressing language and translation concerns. The issues covered in these sections help to deal with *hapax legomena* and other words with relatively uncertain

²⁵J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996).

²⁶*Ibid.*, 13.

²⁷Hugh Williamson, *Isaiah 1-5*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2014).

meanings in the Hebrew text. Secondly, Williamson provides an exegetical examination of the text and seeks to employ a historical-critical method, which is helpful for discerning the setting and significance of the original audience. Williamson's approach to exegesis stands in contrast to Oswalt's in the way he continually addresses redaction-criticism and presumes Isaiah is comprised of multiple authors with a late final compilation, thus he refers to Isaiah as "the book called Isaiah."

John Watts provides a helpful addition to the works already mentioned. Watts's first of a two-volume series, *Isaiah 1-33*,²⁸ overlaps Williamson's commentary on the first five chapters but provides something which Williamson does not, namely, introductory material. Watts does not simply begin with Isaiah 1; instead, he first addresses typical introductory issues such as author, date of writing, audience, and purpose. Watts's work is also more technical than Oswalt's in that he addresses original language issues. Therefore, Watts furthers the exegetical analysis in both chapters covered and also in introductory material. One distinction to be noted between the introductory material provided by Watts and that of Oswalt is the approach to authorship, for Watts presumes the book of Isaiah to have multiple authors with a mid-fifth century BC final compilation.

John Goldingay and David Payne's edition in the International Critical Commentary Series falls in a similar vein to Williamson's commentary.²⁹ Goldingay is helpful as he seeks to tie together other portions of Isaiah to the 16 chapters covered in this two-volume set. The exegetical insights are also helpful as they interact with the original language and literary issues. Lacking in this edition are theological conclusions and an overall thesis for these passages. Therefore, Goldingay's work, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55; A Literary-Theological Commentary*, functions as a helpful companion

²⁸John Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 24, rev. ed. (Dallas: Word, 2004).

²⁹John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40-55*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2007); and John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 56-66*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2014).

text. In this later work Goldingay focuses more upon the theological connections found in the book of Isaiah than nuanced exegetical insight.

Barry Webb's contribution to the discussion of Isaiah, *The Message of Isaiah*,³⁰ is theological in nature and is specifically directed toward a biblical theological perspective. Similar to the exegetical commentaries listed, Webb undertakes one passage at a time. Webb's focus is on biblical theology in Isaiah is expressed in his analysis of themes and imagery which propel the redemptive storyline of Scripture.

In addition to his exegetical commentary, John Goldingay has also contributed to the theological discussion of Isaiah. *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*, is written using a twofold approach.³¹ He first analyzes the text of Isaiah by chapter in chronological order. Through this analysis he identifies theological themes in a case-by-case basis. The second portion of Goldingay's work is the most helpful for he takes the theological concepts he has developed, through his chapter-by-chapter approach, and constructs a compilation of overarching theological themes that develop within the corpus of Isaiah.

In order to aid in the development of sermons appropriately stemming from a biblical theological perspective Sydney Greidanus' work, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, will be consulted.³² Greidanus bridges the gap between a hermeneutical approach and a homiletical structure.

Rationale for the Congregation of First Calvary Baptist Church

Many times when Southern Baptist pastors preach from the Old Testament, the

³⁰Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles' Wings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997).

³¹John Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014).

³²Sydney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament; A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999).

gospel is nowhere to be found—at least not until the sermon is over and an attempt is made to give a gospel invitation. My local congregation, First Calvary Baptist Church, falls in the category of a well-established, traditional Southern Baptist church, but we have taken steps to counteract this superficial approach to preaching the gospel. The primary way has been a very recent move to begin preaching expositional sermons in a book-by-book fashion. This expositional style lends itself to properly placing each passage of Scripture into salvation history. Despite this recent shift in the preaching diet of First Calvary, the congregation still has four needs: expositional preaching from the Old Testament, a demonstration of the Old Testament’s role in redemptive history, for the gospel to be put on display in passages outside of the four canonical gospels, and the ability to see how the Old Testament applies to the lives of New Testament Christians.

The first reason for choosing the book of Isaiah is born out of the local congregation’s need for faithful expository preaching. Expository sermons are a relatively new development for our congregation. In the past two years we have been able to transition into a regular practice of expository preaching, and in particular, preaching through books of the Bible. To date, the books of the Bible that have been preached have come exclusively from the New Testament, hence the need for an Old Testament book like Isaiah. The only deterrent to preaching the book of Isaiah is its length, for a book of this size poses a potential stumbling block for a congregation less accustomed to book-by-book exposition. Therefore, the very nature of this sermon series is to demonstrate the major theme of the book of Isaiah in a condensed fashion by undertaking seven passages that portray the major thrust of the book.

In conjunction with the lack of Old Testament representation through expositional sermons, is the perceived disconnect between the Old Testament and God’s redemptive activity in history. A biblical theological approach will be emphasized in the development of each of these sermons in order to make the connection between the Old Testament, specifically Isaiah, and the redemptive activity of God. A helpful means of

connecting the Old Testament with the redemptive activity of God is to begin with common ground. The congregation of First Calvary Baptist Church is keenly aware of the redemptive work of God displayed in the life of Christ. This is primarily because of the expositional preaching that has taken place in the New Testament as of late. Isaiah connects well with this already established common ground because, outside of the Psalms, Isaiah is referenced more often in the New Testament than any other Old Testament book. The New Testament writers regularly reference or directly allude to Isaiah as a means of demonstrating the advancement of the redemptive narrative begun in the Old Testament. This project sought, in part, to emphasize the connection between the book of Isaiah and the New Testament, and especially in a way that highlights Isaiah's role in redemptive history.

Simply showing the Old Testament's connection to the New Testament would diminish Isaiah's role in redemptive history because Isaiah falls in the middle of God's story. The goal is to show "the interpretive perspective reflected in the way the biblical authors have presented their understanding of earlier Scripture [and] redemptive history."³³ Therefore, the elements of the story that precede Isaiah are just as crucial as those that follow. Once again Isaiah is an ideal choice in helping the congregation make the connection with the portion of Scripture, which precedes it, because Isaiah is constantly making reference to earlier Scripture. Therefore, Isaiah's position in the redemptive historical narrative is clearly defined by his extensive reference to earlier Scripture and the overwhelming way later biblical authors reference his book.

In order for the gospel to be put on display in each sermon, two connections were made. The first has already been discussed—to connect the book of Isaiah with the overarching redemptive story of Scripture. The second is to connect each of the seven passages with the central theme of Isaiah, namely, that judgment is the conduit for the

³³Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*, loc. 126.

hope of future redemption. By placing each of the seven sermons in this more immediate gospel narrative, the congregation was able to see the good news of the Messiah more fully on display in the book of Isaiah.

Identifying Isaiah's position in redemptive history allowed the congregation to rightly understand how Isaiah applies to their lives. By approaching Isaiah in this biblical theological manner and working from the common ground of the New Testament, the connection could be made between the book of Isaiah and local church congregation. Then the congregation was able to draw out applications to their lives from the Old Testament. Goldsworthy explains, "Biblical theology enables us to discover how any Bible text relates to ourselves. Because Christ is the fixed point of reference for theology, we are concerned with how the text relates to Christ and how we relate to Christ."³⁴ By expressing this simple hermeneutical principle in each one of the sermons, Isaiah became a case study of sorts. Our congregation's application of the Old Testament moved beyond moral platitudes and a gospel invitation to "elucidate the biblical worldview not merely so that it can be studied but so that it can be adopted."³⁵

The need for Isaiah to be preached to the congregation of First Calvary Baptist Church was first and foremost the need to declare "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Second, the preaching of Isaiah fit well with the current needs of the congregation, for there had been an absence of expositional, gospel-centered preaching until recently. A seven-part series on the book of Isaiah was a case study for the congregation because, by this example, they would better understand and interact with the redemptive story of God and the application of the Old Testament to their lives.

³⁴Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 71.

³⁵Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation*, loc. 721.

Selected Passages for a Sermon Series from the Book of Isaiah

Signing up for a 5k run and finding oneself in the middle of a marathon would not only feel like a cruel trick, but it could leave the less experienced runner overwhelmed and exhausted. Preaching the entire book of Isaiah was a marathon, but squeezing the entirety of Isaiah into seven sermons at first glance may appear to be a daunting task, which has the potential to leave the congregation exhausted and overwhelmed. To offset this potential danger, a narrower scope was used as a scheme for approaching the book of Isaiah. To make a book as long as Isaiah more manageable for the congregation, a single theme was used as the subject of the sermon series. The theme undertaken in this sermon series was judgment as the conduit for the hope of redemption.

In order to demonstrate the theme of judgment as the conduit for the hope of redemption, and in order to represent the literary flow of the book, a selection of chapters were chosen in a distinct pattern. The project consisted of seven sermons formed around the following structure: three sermons depicting the contrast of judgment and the hope of redemption, two sermons depicting judgment, and two sermons depicting the hope of redemption. The order was contrast, judgment, judgment, contrast, hope, hope, and contrast. The flow was born out of the literary structure of the book. The first five chapters are considered introductory, and the second group of chapters leads up to chapter 39, in which the major theme is judgment. The second half of the book emphasizes redemption. The final two chapters provide a conclusion. The passages drove home the series' overarching theme of judgment and redemption. To demonstrate how the theme can be laid out for a congregation, a brief description of the expounded passages follows.

Isaiah 4

Isaiah 4 represents and introduces the theme of the hope of redemption through the conduit of judgment in two primary forms. First, chapter 4 is set “in the first five

chapters, which many commentators consider to be introductory,”³⁶ and thus foreshadows the remainder of the book. As mentioned, the first five introductory chapters have a peculiar feature: they oscillate between judgment and the hope of redemption without warning. John Oswalt provides insight into the oscillation in these opening chapters: “The prophet puts together concepts that at first glance seem to be composed of contrasting opposites. Before he has finished exploring them, though, we see that the points are complementary rather than contradictory.”³⁷ The second manner in which chapter 4 conveys the message of judgment as a conduit for the hope of redemption is through the climatic verse of the paragraph. Isaiah 4:4 declares that the redemption of Israel will come through judgment in the form of washing and cleansing.

Isaiah 6

The opening five chapters declare that both the nations and Israel will face judgment, and this presents a dilemma since “Israel is going to be the holy people of God to whom the nations will come to learn of God.”³⁸ The solution is found in the expression of typology used by the author. Isaiah becomes a type of Israel and his cleansing is indicative of the cleansing that Israel must experience. Ultimately, the type of cleansing Isaiah has received is the same cleansing the nations will receive, because they have come to Israel to see their God and the cleansing he provides. Fittingly, “sinful Israel can become servant Israel when the experience of Isaiah becomes the experience of the nation.”³⁹ Isaiah as a typological figure makes sense of the second half of the chapter. Isaiah is summoned by God to proclaim a message of judgment, but God will see to it that Israel does not respond favorably and turn from their wicked ways. Israel must go

³⁶Oswalt, “Isaiah,” 60.

³⁷Ibid., 59-60.

³⁸Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39*, 174.

³⁹Ibid.

through the same purifying judgment as Isaiah in order to receive the removal of guilt and atonement for sins.

Isaiah 24

Chapter 24 is a pronouncement of judgment upon the whole earth. The pronouncement is not a generic condemnation, but is nuanced to allow God to reveal his character and plan for history through the judgment proclamation. The first third of the chapter depicts global wrath with all-inclusive language like “a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched” (24:6). The first nuance to take note of is the reason God gives for judging the earth. God “determines the fate of the nations by their relation to his law (24:1, 3, 5, 14, 21).”⁴⁰ Furthermore, God has brought the nations to the place of judgment. Oswalt writes, “It is not he who reacts to the nations, but the nations who respond to him.”⁴¹ As is seen in later portions of the sermon series, the earth can place its hope in redemption because its judgment is the same judgment Israel experiences. Israel functions as a microcosm of the whole earth, and therefore functions as a type of sorts.

Isaiah 39-40

Isaiah 39 and 40 demonstrate the contrast of the hope of redemption coming through judgment. In chapter 39 Isaiah proclaims a harsh statement of judgment to King Hezekiah about the coming judgment. Immediately upon the heels of this pronouncement of judgment is the refrain of “comfort, comfort” (40:1). Then chapter 40 begins using the phrase “fear not,” which occurs ten more times in the next thirteen chapters. Judah is instructed to take comfort and not to fear, because through the judgment redemption is found. Some have famously suggested that the shift in message from certain judgment to

⁴⁰Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, 444.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

hope, so starkly demonstrated between chapters 39 and 40, is indicative of a change in author and the later compilation of separate works into one book of Isaiah. To make this statement is to miss the theological premise at work in these two chapters. The same stark contrast is present throughout the book, but particularly in the introduction and conclusion. As mentioned, the first five introductory chapters experience the same oscillation from judgment to hope in redemption, not unlike what takes place in chapters 39 and 40. The concluding chapters experience the same back and forth between hope and judgment. Oswalt explains, “Thus the pattern is: hope, judgment, hope, judgment, hope, which is a reversal of the pattern in chs. 1-5.”⁴² Therefore, to conclude that the reader should see a division between chapters 39 and 40 is to ignore the theological shift in the introduction and conclusion. The sermon centered upon these chapters demonstrates the theological theme of the judgment of Judah not as avoidable, but as the means by which redemption is brought about, thus giving Judah, and ultimately all nations, a reason to hope.

Isaiah 44

Chapter 44 demonstrates the intention and ability of God to deliver his people. The judgment that God’s people have experienced demonstrates their complete inability to save themselves; they have completely failed to uphold God’s standard and have subsequently received the final curse of the covenant. Leviticus describes the judgment figuratively: “Walking contrary to me, so that I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies” (26:40b-41a). The complete failure on Israel’s part sets up the crux of chapter 44. Oswalt writes, “God has reminded the people that their sin has removed him from any obligation. . . . But that does not mean that God will not deliver; it means only that what he does is a free gift growing out of his own love.”⁴³

⁴²John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 654.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 164.

Isaiah 55

The second of the two redemption passages is Isaiah 55. In this chapter, Isaiah is imploring Israel to take advantage of the redemption that has been brought about by the Servant. Isaiah's use of imperatival language is the means by which "the prophet implores Israel not to miss what God has for her, even if what God has said is not entirely understandable (vv. 8-11)."⁴⁴ The lack of understanding from these middle verses is bound up in the mystery of the Old Testament. "The Old Testament sets up a mystery, which is solved by what the New Testament reveals."⁴⁵ The mystery set up in this passage involves the nations, who like Israel, desire redemption. This mystery is resolved in the New Testament when it is revealed that both Israel and the nations find their redemption in Christ.

Isaiah 65

Chapter 65 addresses "the Lord's penitent people living among ruins, waiting for a remedial act of God. This is not the Lord's ultimate intention for his people."⁴⁶ The first seventeen verses describe God's judgment as being directed toward those in the nation of Israel who are not part of the remnant. In other words, being a Judean does not secure God's mercy or provide hope for redemption. However, the passage does describe a remnant who are God's true servants. The destiny of this remnant of servants is contrasted with those who ignore the call of God, for those who ignore the call of God are seeking their destiny from the gods of Fortune and Destiny. Isaiah writes of their ironic position, for they are securing their futures before God: "I will destine you to the sword, and all of you shall bow down to the slaughter" (Isa 65:12). Thus, Isaiah clarifies the outcome of God's judgment upon his children. Despite the ruins of judgment, in which

⁴⁴Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66*, 164.

⁴⁵Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*, loc. 573.

⁴⁶Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 527.

the nation of Israel finds herself, God has a destiny of redemption for his remnant of servants.

The focus of the sermon series was to highlight the theme of judgment and redemption as presented by Isaiah. Each sermon was developed in an expository fashion. Additionally, each sermon sought to reflect the literary structure of Isaiah so as to give the congregation a general understanding and overview of the book in a sermon series. Biblical theology was employed, especially as a means of placing each passage in the grander story line of Scripture.

CHAPTER 2

SERMON 1: HOPE IN THE FACE OF JUDGMENT

A group of men were being led down the beach at knife point by their larger-than-life captors. The twenty-one Coptic Christians were being videoed as they marched to their execution at the hands of their Islamic State captors. The video was then quickly released through a variety of social media outlets, so that an offended and gawking world could watch this execution in full “HD” quality. The idea of twenty-one Christians being beheaded is overwhelming. The story had been all over the news for a few days when, in an attempt to find out more about the story, I began to read through a handful of articles. I was quickly skimming through an article describing the video, then scrolling up onto my screen was a still image taken from the video. In a brief second I prepared myself to see the worst, but it was a picture of the video’s title, an English title with an Arabic subtitle. As my eyes raced over the words for about the third time the title began to sink in: “A Message Signed in Blood to the Nation of the Cross.” What the knife wielding terrorist standing behind these men did not realize, is that they were actually presenting a powerful reminder of why twenty-one men would rather die than convert to Islam. We have been given a message signed in blood to the kingdom of the cross, and the message comes in the form of a broken body and a bloody cross.

Those twenty-one men had the ability to stand firm in their faith in the face of the direst consequences, because they hoped their decision was worth it. If their hope could carry them through the ultimate consequence for believing, then it stands to reason that the same hope would be able to carry them, and by extension us, through other less difficult moments. This is similar to a Maximum Strength Tylenol commercial. If the makers of Tylenol can demonstrate that their product is able handle the worst form of

back pain, then it certainly can handle other minor aches and pains. It is an argument from the ultimate to the lesser. Therefore, would it not be great to have a hope capable of sustaining people through the worst situations? Isaiah is preaching to a group of people facing the worst moment of their lives and he prescribes a hope that will sustain them through even the most difficult circumstances they will ever face.

Isaiah 4:2-6

In that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the LORD will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.¹

The first five chapters of Isaiah are considered by many to be introductory.² In these introductory chapters one discovers a central theme to the prophecies of Isaiah; Israel will experience God's wrath as they are overtaken by a foreign armies and carried off into exilic judgment. The focus of Isaiah 4:2-6 is the paradoxical theme that the hope of future redemption will come through God's act of judgment. Facing God's judgment is not their final destiny; they can still rely upon God's promise to redeem his people in the future through this act of judgment.³ In this passage are three forms of hope for future redemption: hope in the Branch, hope in judgment, and the power of hope.

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

²John Oswalt, "Isaiah: Short Course in Biblical Theology," *Calvin Theological Journal* 39 (2004): 60.

³Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles Wings*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 31.

Hope in the Branch

The book of Isaiah does not read like a news report or a history book, so by necessity some interpretation must take place. On the other hand, Isaiah is a literary master piece that utilizes numerous literary tools such as symbolism and allusion. Right off the bat in Isaiah 4:2 a phrase is used in almost code language: “the branch of the Lord.” The translation from the English Standard Version does not capitalize the word “branch” while the New American Standard Version does capitalize it. Whether or not the letter “B” in this passage is upper case is significant. An uppercase “B” means that Isaiah is directly referencing Christ while a lowercase letter means Isaiah probably had vegetation in mind.⁴ The concern for whether this word refers to Christ or not has given

⁴The term “branch” referring directly to Christ is disputed, but the evidence does seem to support this view. Those who would disagree with a direct correlation to Christ have generally done so on the grounds that Isaiah is using the first half of verse 2 in parallel with the latter. Therefore, they conclude that the term “branch” is referring literally to vegetation. H. G. M. Williamson is staunchly in favor of a literal vegetation rendering, and he suggests that the phrase should read, “the vegetation of the Lord.” Hugh G. M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1-5*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2014), 307. He concludes from this translation that the right “approach interprets the phrase as a reference to what God will make to grow in the natural realm.” Ibid. The difficulty of such an unsymbolic translation of the term “branch” is found in its usage in other passages. For instance, the term “branch” or נֶחֱמָץ in Jer 23:5; 33:15 and in Zech 3:8; 6:12 make clear reference to an individual in respective Messianic contexts. Barry Webb sees the parallel nature of the verse, and at the same time acknowledges the Messianic aspect: “It seems best to take the full-grown plant, in conjunction with what follows as a general image of the Lord’s saving purposes come to fruition and on display for all to see on the last day.” Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, 53. The downfall of those that would suggest “ נֶחֱמָץ ” should be translated as “vegetation” is summed up well by J. G. Baldwin: “Most commentators do not consider the phrase to be messianic here, but rather a natural expression for luxuriant wild growth. Yet the passage as a whole is messianic.” J. G. Baldwin, “Semah as a Technical Term in the Prophets,” *Vetus Testamentum* 14 (1964): 93. John Oswalt builds upon this idea by connecting the function of the “branch” in this verse with the New Testament: “The thought that the Messiah is the mediator of God’s glory is a prominent one in the New Testament (Luke 2:32; 9:26, 32; John 1:14; 2:11; 11:4; 17:5, 22, 24; 1 Cor. 2:8; 2 Cor. 4:6; Col. 1:27; Heb. 1:3).” John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 147. Upon acknowledging the messianic nature of the passage, one is able to better account for the seemingly parallel expressions of vegetation in Isaiah 4:2. “This interpretation shows how God will reverse the situation in 2:6-4:1. He will (a) replace the proud leaders of his people and give them a new leader, the Branch of the Lord, and (b) replace the ruin, devastation, and shame of the destroyed land with the lush crops that will have great fertility. This fits the context of what God will do in parallel Old Testament messianic passages that describe the coming of God’s glorious kingdom. Ezekiel also presents both aspects (the Messiah and fertility), parallel to Isaiah’s vision of the future. Ezek 34:20-31 refers to God’s glorious kingdom as a place where ‘my shepherd, my servant David’ will tend God’s sheep (Ezek 34:23; cf. 36:29-30) and ‘the trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops’ (Ezek 34:27; cf. 37:24-25).” Gary Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, The New American Commentary, vol. 15A (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 157.

commentators quite a bit of angst, hence the change in lettering between the translations. Whether Isaiah intends for readers to understand “branch” as a code word for Jesus is not extremely consequential because the thrust is the same. For the phrase is either referring to the provider of salvation in the Branch or the provision of salvation symbolized by the fruitfulness described in the passage. A way to summarize the concept is to say, “Within the book of Isaiah, the terms resonate with messianic reference both in terms of messianic bringer of salvation (the ‘branch’) and the return of paradise (‘the fruit of the land’).”⁵ Isaiah’s use of messianic language sets us up to understand the significance of his prophecy. The significance is found in the fact that once the branch of the Lord is rendered glorious, the fruit of the land becomes so pronounced it is the “pride and honor of the survivors of Israel” (4:2). The idea that in the messianic age the ground would burst forth with an abundance of vegetation appears to be more than just a comment about crop shares increasing. Isaiah is predicting that in the time of the Messiah the curse inflicted upon the creation since the fall of Adam and Eve will be reversed. In Genesis 3:17-19 the curse is described:

And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

The passage at-hand from Isaiah 4 describes an alternate universe from the sin cursed ground described in Genesis 3. He is suggesting that there will be a time when the vegetation of the earth will be bursting forth in unprecedented quantities. The sentiment of Isaiah is expressed well by Alec Motyer: “Sin diminished and restricted the natural world . . . but when sin is removed nature will be renewed and released.”⁶ In other words,

⁵Brevard Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 36.

⁶Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 69.

the Messiah's, Jesus,' coming reverses the curse of sin and its effects on us and the world we inhabit. We find out hope in a future world is free from a cursed ground, and this reversal of the curse on the ground is indicative of a complete curse reversal. We will inhabit a world free from all the effects of sin; free from Islamic State terrorist and school shootings, free of leukemia and a need for breast cancer month, and free of unfruitful hard labor as we try to scrape out a living. Jesus' messianic action undoes the failings of this world. And as we will see, the hope of Jesus reversing the failings of our current fallen world is more than a delightful prospect.

The way we usually talk about hope is to assume a certain level of uncertainty. Hope is often couched in terms of probability that things may or may not workout. "I hope my football team wins this Saturday afternoon," or "I hope it doesn't rain." Christian hope, however, is different. Christian hope, as presented in Isaiah's prophecy, is based upon certainty. Isaiah presents this idea of certainty through three seemingly non-descript words in the beginning of verse 2: "In that day." Isaiah says that the events of the passage occur at a specific time: "In that day." The phrase has an almost technical meaning; it is Isaiah's way of alluding to a specific time in the future. The phrase is used to refer to the time of Jesus' first and/or second coming, and in this particular instance it is referring to Jesus' second coming which will be more obvious in the following pages.⁷ In Isaiah's writing, the terminology "in that day" is a definitive time in the future. Isaiah is not suggesting that the Messiah will reverse the curse if everything works out, instead he is explaining that there is a definite time when the Messiah will come and reverse the effects of the curse. Christian hope has *certainty* as a foundational principle. Therefore, our hope is grounded, and able to sustain us in a way other hopes cannot. Other forms of hope for the future do not carry certainty with them. You may hope that you reach

⁷An example of "in that day" referring to Jesus' first coming is found in Isa 52:6. This verse refers to the Messiah's first coming. Numerous verses use "in that day" to refer to Jesus' second coming in the Isaianic text, and chap. 4 is one such occasion as demonstrated below.

retirement, hope you get married, hope you land that new job, or hope that kids grow out of this phase. We would like to see each one of these areas come to fruition, but at the same time know there is no certainty. Isaiah is urging his hearers to find hope in the branch of the Lord, because through him is found curse reversing, guaranteed hope.

Isaiah then describes the benefits of certain future by using images of historical proportions. Isaiah 4:5 begins with a creation pronouncement, but the terminology here should not be overlooked. In the phrase “the Lord will create,” the word for create is unique. The Hebrew word in this instance is “bara” (“בָּרָא”), which is a term only attributed to God and his acts of creation. This term appears first in Genesis 1:1 when God creates the earth and all its inhabitants. So when we see God employing such creative activity we are drawn to the notion that he is creating a new world. This new world ushered in by the saving activities of the Messiah, and described as containing curse reversing growth, is one in which God’s presence provides continual direction as to what his will is. God’s direction for his people was expressed directly in Exodus 13:21: “And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night a pillar of fire to give them light.” God gave the people his ever present guidance. It a wonderful thing to have no doubt that we are fulfilling the will of God; such assurance is an amazing comfort and provides a unique confidence in our relationship with the Father. Spouses run into this regularly. When a husband or wife realizes the perfect gift or date or meal, a joy is realized because they know what will be pleasing to the spouse. In the time of the “glorious branch of the Lord,” this ever present guidance allows us to delight in our relationship with God. This guidance is made possible because of the manner in which God’s presence dwells upon us.

The second benefit of our certain hope is God’s presence, which is described in Isaiah 4:5b as canopy. “For over all the glory there will be a canopy.” The magnitude of the canopy presence should not be underestimated. Oswalt writes, “The glory which the canopy of cloud covers (Exod. 40:34) no longer resides merely within the temple precincts;

now it is the possession of all who worship the God of Zion.”⁸ God’s people are continually in the presence of God in the time of the “glorious branch.” The presence of God dwelling with his people is likened to a booth that provides shade from the heat of day. We may picture a lean-to providing a little shade, but Isaiah is picturing a booth as in the festival time ritual image. Hamilton explains, “The people lived in booths or tabernacles throughout the time of their wilderness wandering on the way to the Promised Land.”⁹ Booths became a constant reminder of the character of God repeated throughout the history of his people. Hamilton continues, “Booths would teach Israel that as God provided for them on their journey through the wilderness in the past, so he would provide for them on their journey through the wilderness after the new exodus.”¹⁰ The canopy is also described as a refuge. Refuge is a notion picked up richly by the psalmist. Refuge in the psalter is connected to safety, protection, deliverance, and salvation. When the concept of a refuge is combined with the biblical understanding of booths, we encounter an image of God as an all-encompassing canopy giving security and provision. The benefits of certain hope encourages us to place our trust and confidence in the branch of the Lord.

Hope in Judgment

Isaiah’s message of certain hope was being proclaimed to a people facing certain judgment. There was a coming judgment for the people of Israel and they were doing everything they could to avoid it. The people of Israel were even willing to solicit the help of an old enemy in Egypt to avoid an attack from Assyria. So when they hear that their salvation will come through a spirit of judgment and burning it would have been extremely disheartening and probably confusing. To see their perspective more fully we

⁸Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, 149.

⁹James Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), loc. 823, Kindle.

¹⁰Ibid.

must put ourselves back into the position of Isaiah's original audience. They were hearing a twofold message. First, Isaiah was prophesying the demise of the Israelites at the hands of a foreign army. The secondary message was one of hope. The people should not despair for through the work of the Lord's branch they would receive future blessing and peace. However, Isaiah's message of hope was not the message the people of Israel wanted to hear. Israel's desire was to be delivered from the impending onslaught by a foreign army. Isaiah on the other hand was offering hope, but it was hope through judgment not from it.

Isaiah is effectively presenting a twist in the narrative Israel expected. For God was not going to remove his wrath from their future. The people were going to be confronted with "a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning" (Isa 4:4). How was this at all hopeful? The flow of the passage instructs at this point. As mentioned, verse 2 begins by reciting the common phrase "in that day" to identify that the following events are during the messianic age. During that time the people left in Zion will be called holy according to verse 3 because they have passed through judgment and burning as verse 4 describes. Which leaves the question of how judgment bring about holiness?

Hope of redemption comes through judgment because God's righteous judgment being poured out means we are made holy.¹¹ God does not spare us from facing his judgment but he fully pours out every bit of judgment we deserve. God does not hold back; every ounce of judgment that we will ever deserve is levied against us. Then the branch of the Lord is a reversal of the curse through substitution. Everything that we deserve is poured out on us, but Jesus steps in our place to absorb all the wrath and punishment we have rightly incurred.¹² Jesus takes hell for you, and every bit of it for eternity. Then

¹¹"Here he acts in judgment/'justice' and fire/'burning,' i.e., the Lord so acts as to meet alike the objective demand of absolute justice and the subjective demands of his own holy nature." Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 68.

¹²This position is substantiated through an inter-textual perspective, as articulated by John Oswalt when he writes, "Can this fire atone for sin (6:7)? Here correlation with other Scriptures seems to support the messianic interpretation. Sin must be borne (Lev. 1:4, etc.; 16:20–22; Isa. 53:4, 5), and it cannot be borne apart from bloodshed (Lev. 16:11–19; 17:11; Isa. 53:12; Matt. 26:28). According to Zechariah, it

instead of receiving God's wrath in hell, we are made completely holy: "The Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains" (Isa 4:4). Through him we can have the complete removal of the effects of sin and the punishment due us. Paul understands this hope fully and therefore he is able to write,

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. . . . By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according the Spirit. (Rom 8:1, 3-4)

We do not hope that God will remove his judgment from us but that he will fully pour it out, and then Christ will step in and absorb every bit of it. Jesus has taken our sentence of sin and death through judgment and given us hope in the future. Lest it seem like a stretch that Isaiah is referring to Christ's substitutionary death, we shall consult another occasion when a prophetic writer takes up the same subject matter. Zechariah uses the same language of the Branch and inextricably ties this symbol to Christ. Then Zechariah demonstrates that the work accomplished by the Branch is the removal of wrath and sin. According to Zechariah 3:8-9, by the Branch, God declares, "I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day." Zechariah is making the same case Isaiah 4 is outlining, and it is one of hope. We have hope that life provided by the branch of the Lord is free of condemnation, because all iniquity and judgment has been fully applied to Christ, and through this accomplishment we are made holy. The notion that the people of God can place their hope in the redemption he will provide in the future comes not by the withholding of judgment but instead comes through judgment. Judgment has become the conduit by which the hope of redemption is channeled and this theme is put on display in the book of Isaiah and will tie each of the following six chapters together.¹³

is through the Branch that the guilt of Judah will be removed (3:8, 9) and a fountain opened for the cleansing of her sin and uncleanness (13:1)." Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, 147.

¹³Webb describes the centrality of this theme when he writes that "the book of Isaiah is a book about demolition and reconstruction, judgment, and salvation. And the order is significant; paradoxically, salvation emerges out of judgment and is possible only because of it." Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, 31.

Therefore, we can have hope that we have been set free from the consequences of sin. Lind Millard writes, “The heart of the promise is moral cleansing; this remnant ‘shall be called holy.’”¹⁴ We have been made holy, perfect, in God’s sight; there is nothing left to punish in a punitive sense. There are consequences for sin in the form of discipline, but the writer of Hebrews tells that this is also for our good (Heb 12:3-11). However, we need not fear that one day God is going to punish us for some past sin. Karma, as it is commonly referenced, or more correctly dharma, which suggests that past wrong doings will come back to haunt you, has no place in the thoughts of a believer. Similarly, we should not worry that we will pay for the sins of our parents, or our children will pay for our sins for Christ has made full payment. To be in such a position is very hope filled, for to live in fear of future condemnation is a form of death; it can be depressing and hopeless.

However, one caveat is to be made. Jesus’s sacrificial death does remove the consequences of sin and provide a glorious future, but it is not universal. The holy cleaning is only for the daughters of Zion—those who would put their trust and faith in the future redeemer. In other words, to have the life giving, curse removing work of Jesus applied to us we must first place our faith and trust in Christ. We are instructed by God to repent and believe in Jesus. We must stop living life according to our own rules, which is sin, and live life according to desires of Christ. Upon making a profession of faith in Christ and repentance of our sins we find life and hope in the future.

Power of Hope

Isaiah is instructing his hearers, and us, to put our trust in future hope, and to be accurate, Isaiah is proposing that his hearers direct their attention to the relatively distant future. Similarly, how can we find hope for today by hoping in the relative distant future? Furthermore, Isaiah is preaching to God’s people at one of their darkest moments.

¹⁴Millard Lind, “Political Implications of Isaiah 6,” in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretative Tradition*, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig Evans (Boston: Brill, 1997), 334.

The Assyrian army was about to invade Judah, and Isaiah is warning the people that they are about to be given over to a foreign army by the hand of God. Isaiah describes the impending destruction described in the preceding chapters (2:6-4:1). In these chapters Isaiah tells the people that they are going to experience the wrath of God through an Assyrian army. Then Isaiah encourages the people of God by suggesting that even in the face of this great threat they can have hope. Isaiah's message of hope is grounded in the branch of the Lord, and Isaiah is suggesting that this hope is strong enough to sustain the people of God going through the greatest trial of their lives. How can the power of future hope give sustenance for today? How can hope in future redemption sustain us during our darkest hour? The key is to realize that Isaiah is prescribing more goats and less hamburger.

Nicholas Kristof is a writer for the *New York Times* and a self-proclaimed “bleeding heart.” In an article titled, “The Power of Hope is Real,” he laments, “There has never been much rigorous evidence that outside aid can sustainably lift people out of poverty.”¹⁵ He goes on to describe a study “involving 21,000 people in six countries.” The study identifies how to help those in a perpetual state of poverty and despair turn the corner. The conductors of the study identify the way to lift people out of poverty is the “one mechanism [of] hope.”¹⁶ Instead of being given food to sustain a family for an extended period of time, people were given livestock, like goats, in which they could create opportunities for the future. One of the groups studied was in India. Instead of food assistance this Indian group was given goats and livestock training. One may guess the outcome—those that participated found hope in the prospect of seeing future gains from the livestock. The significant finding of the study was the benefit that one probably would not guess. Those involved began picking up other jobs besides the livestock and

¹⁵Nicholas Kristof, “The Power of Hope is Real,” accessed September 20, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/21/opinion/nicholas-kristof-the-power-of-hope-is-real.html?_r=0.

¹⁶Ibid.

their economic status improved by 433 percent. The hope these people had in the relatively distant future immediately began to spill over into other areas of life.

Future hope has an exponential effect. Isaiah is describing hope in the same terms as Kristof's article. Isaiah was defining hope for the future, but his message of hope was intended to carry his hearers through the immediate circumstances of a foreign attack and forced deportation. Hope for future redemption had an immediate impact. Isaiah is suggesting that if we place our hope in the future redemption made possible by the branch of the Lord, we will increase our overall position by 433 percent in God's economy. Future hope has an exponential effect that extends to our immediate circumstances and gives us the power to overcome an onslaught by a foreign army.

We can follow the help of Isaiah's prescription and tap into the power of hope. We hope in Jesus' redemptive work which has taken all the punishment for anyone who believes in his name. God is not holding out some condemnation for you. The idea that your past sins are going to come back to haunt you is to misunderstand redemption through judgment, for God fully poured out his wrath on Christ. And this hope that God has fully taken the punishment for your sins, and provided a glorious future has an exponential effect that extends beyond our future right into our day to day lives.

The more convinced of the hope we have in the future the greater the effect we will see in other areas of life. As was previously mentioned, this passage is introductory and the theme of this passage comes up again and again throughout the book. Therefore, we are able to perceive that the desired effect of repetition is to be winsome. For instance, the Lord's Supper functions this way; it constantly reminds us of the substitutionary sacrifice made on our behalf in a repetitive manner and directs us to the future return of the Lord.

Conclusion

Believers have the same hope Isaiah was proclaiming to the nation of Israel; a hope strong enough to bring God's children through the worst moment of their lives.

Being continually reminded of Christ's judgment absorbing work is the mechanism by which we find hope. It is a hope that we will not face the penalty for our sins because Christ has fully absorbed the judgment and burning we deserve. We are made clean, even holy, by God pouring out every bit of wrath we deserve. Our hope in the work of Christ sets us free from a life of sin and death and provides hope for the future as God's redeemed people. And that hope has an exponential effect that allows us to have hope for the onslaught of foreign armies that we face even now. It is a hope strong enough to sustain twenty-one men being marched down a beach with the threat of certain death.

CHAPTER 3

SERMON 2: THRESHOLD TREMORS

How can we see our sanctuary packed full of people? How can we have so many people join our church that we have to decide between adding another Sunday morning service and building a bigger building? As a pastor, this thought has crossed my mind more than once, and I suspect I am not alone in considering what it will take to influence more people with our faith. Questions like these are especially profound when we hear that the number of Christians in the US has been in decline over the past 7 years. The Pew Research Center recently released a poll suggesting Christian Americans have seen a 7.8 percent drop between 2007 and 2014.¹ So in a world where Christianity is in decline how do we turn the tide? A systemic drop in the number of those who claim to be believers is not something unique to twenty-first century America. There are very strong parallels among people in the Bible, and in particular during the time of Isaiah. So let us begin looking at these parallels by reading Isaiah's calling into ministry in Isaiah 6.

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." And he said, "Go, and say to this people: "'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their

¹Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," accessed September 17, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the LORD removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.

Isaiah 6 feels like it should be at the beginning of the book, but clearly Isaiah wanted to provide an introduction as a lead-in to his calling into prophetic ministry. Isaiah 1-5, being the introduction to the book, drive home one question.² “It is the question of how spiritual renewal can be effected, so that Israel may become the centre of world blessing that it is destined to be [as described in Isaiah] 2:1-5.”³ Isaiah 6 begins to answer this question of how spiritual renewal can be effected. To see how we fit into this idea of spiritual renewal, I will give some background on Isaiah.

Background of Isaiah

Isaiah was a married man with at least two children. His day job was professional prophet. He became a prophet relatively early in his adult life, as is evidenced by his long tenure under two separate kings. Isaiah ministered under King Ahaz and King Hezekiah’s reigns and two separate national crises, and the book of Isaiah is structured around these kings and their respective crises.⁴ Isaiah 6, under consideration here, describes the moment Isaiah’s God-ordained prophetic career began. Isaiah’s calling into vocational ministry resembles other scriptural prophets like Ezekiel, but outside of a handful of biblical examples Isaiah’s experience is very unique. To understand the uniqueness of Isaiah’s experience it is helpful to know the world in which Isaiah was living.

²These chapters are described as introductory in John Oswalt, “Isaiah: Short Course in Biblical Theology,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 39 (2004): 61.

³Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 31.

⁴Duane Garrett, *The Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, forthcoming), 59.

Isaiah was living in a world not unlike the Bible belt south. He was in a traditionally religious affluent society, but his world was in moral and economic decline.⁵ Isaiah's audience was not unlike us in that we are in an affluent post-Christian society. We live in a relatively affluent post-Christian society in South Carolina, and while the future of our economic status is yet to be seen, our moral status is in decline. The issue of homosexuality alone is an indicator of the changing moral climate. Over the course of only a couple decades we have gone from a country that bans homosexual relations in many states to a country that recognizes homosexual unions as marriage.

Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Religious Liberties and Ethics Commission, recently wrote *Onward*, in which he addresses the current state of the nation. He writes,

If we ever were a moral majority, we are no longer. . . . As the secularizing and sexualizing revolutions whirl on, it is no longer possible to pretend that we represent the "real America," a majority of God-loving, hardworking, salt-of-the-earth cultural conservatives.⁶

When we think that we can get back to a set of Christian values that made America great, then I think we are deceived about who rules this world. Satan rules the US and that is not a comment on the government, it is a comment taken from the lips of Jesus, in John 12:31. For decades we have been unsuccessful at getting back Christian values, getting prayer back in schools, seeing our country embrace "Judeo-Christian" values, or having a generation of children that respect adults. This analysis brings us back to Isaiah and the people of his day. For if we find a parallel in the people of Israel, we also will find a parallel in the person of Isaiah as their representative. Isaiah needed to be shaken. Being shaken is not always the approach God uses. For instance, in the calling of Jeremiah, he

⁵"Uzziah's reign was long and prosperous. God lavished success on his people, but they didn't handle it well. They continued to affirm the traditional faith, but God himself became unreal to them." Raymond Ortlund, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 76.

⁶Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville: B & H, 2015), loc. 463, kindle.

is being encouraged by God to not be afraid, to stop trembling. However, we relate more to Isaiah at this point, because of our connection with Isaiah's audience. Thus, we need to be shaken and we live among a people that needs to be shaken. We will look at four types of shaking: a shaking threshold, a shaken Isaiah, an unshaken people, and finally are we shaken.

A Shaking Threshold

The key point of Isaiah 6 can be hard to see because we have made much of a church culture that reflects the sentiments of the surrounding culture. For instance, nearly every man in the church would have shown up in a coat and tie 30 years ago or more. Now if you show up in a suit people think you are preaching or it is your week to close the service in prayer. The culture of First Calvary Baptist Church has changed over the past few decades, and the changes within the church reflect, to some degree, changes in the culture. Stylistic and cultural changes are helpful for the church to make. These changes have been instituted in churches across the country with hopes of reaching a lost and dying generation. However, we have begun to recognize that the Christian influence in America, and even in the Bible belt south, has been slipping. Moore writes that we are no long a moral majority, so despite the efforts to reach a lost world by relating to them, little progress has been made. It is with this very acknowledgment in mind that we come to the text of Isaiah 6. The calling of Isaiah shows that our church, and our community by extension, does not need to reestablish a moral majority based on a set of Judeo-Christian values, instead we need to be shaken by an Isaiah-like vision of God's holiness.

The idea of a six-winged creatures hovering above the throne of God is captivating, but we should not miss the details Isaiah supplies. Isaiah begins his account of events by giving a place in time reference: "In the year that King Uzziah died" (Isa 6:1).

It was not common to date a prophet by the death of a king, but Isaiah does this twice.⁷ And while Uzziah's death symbolized the death of a way of life ("Uzziah's reign was long and prosperous," but has now come to an end⁸), Isaiah seems to be directing attention toward the contrast between an earthly king and a heavenly king. He wants us to see that although earthly kings may come and go, the heavenly King is still high and exalted upon his throne eternally reigning. In opposition to Uzziah, God is the king whose rule never comes to an end. Isaiah's vision begins with a God who is eternally reigning, and while an earthly king's decrees may subside with his passing, God's decrees have an eternal element. This is the beginning place for Isaiah—his perspective of himself changes in light of an eternal king.

God's holiness is also conveyed through his position of ultimate authority. God is governing the earth from his exalted throne, and when the king of God's chosen people dies God is not pacing back and forth in heaven, fretting over who will lead his people. God's authority is ultimate. He is not worried about a change in royalty, much less a presidential primary, like we might be tempted to fret over. God's will is being perfectly carried out, he is always on the throne and no other power supersedes his. Isaiah is undone in the presence of this ultimate authority, this absolute power.

God answers to no one. God is an absolute sovereign. Isaiah describes God's throne as "high and lifted up," which conveys the message that he requires no council. The prophet elaborates on this idea in Isaiah 46:10: "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose." God does not need any consultants to render his decisive rulings because his decisions are perfect. God rules from his throne as a final authority. Isaiah knows see himself more accurately in light of God's perfect standards.

⁷J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 76, writes, "No other prophet dates an event by a death, though Isaiah does so twice (cf. 14:28) and each time with significance."

⁸Ortlund, *Isaiah*, 76.

God's splendor is overwhelming. "His robe filled the temple" (6:1). God's glory is symbolized by the length of his robe, and Isaiah sees a robe that consumes the temple space. We can relate to majesty being conveyed through a grand robe or train. The late Princess Diana famously had a 25-foot train to her wedding dress, and this train expressed her majesty.⁹ Princess Diana's train may have filled a carriage on the way to a wedding, but God's robe fills the temple. Another way to express it is that God's majesty filled every portion of Isaiah's vision. In light of such majesty, Isaiah is overwhelmed.

God is revered. As was referenced previously, God was being attended to by a magnificent six-winged creature. Their appearance seems to only be rivaled by their voices. As they speak to introduce the King above all kings, the "foundations of the thresholds shook" (6:4). Before we get to the effect the thundering voices of the seraphim had upon the temple and Isaiah himself, we should take note of their behavior. For "the [seraphim], by their words and actions, show that the appropriate response is reverence, service and praise."¹⁰ The praise the seraphim express is to constantly announce the character and nature of God; he is holy. Their complete attention is directed toward service of God on his throne. How these winged creatures take flight is of particular note. These six winged creatures only use two wings to fly. Two of their wings are used to cover the eyes from beholding the glory of God—seemingly they are diverting their eyes out of deference—and with a similar connotation they cover their feet. "As the creature should not look upon the Creator, so the created should not be displayed in the sight of the Creator."¹¹ Isaiah sees these magnificent powerful creatures acting with complete reverence as the lesser beings before the Lord on his throne.

⁹Eun Kyung Kim, "Princes William and Harry to Receive Princess Diana's Wedding Gown," *Today News*, September 3, 2014, accessed September 19, 2015, <http://www.today.com/news/princess-dianas-wedding-gown-will-be-turned-over-william-harry-1D80122947>.

¹⁰Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, 59.

¹¹John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 179. This thought is compounded by the idea that

“Holy, holy, holy” (6:3). The very nature of the ones attending to the throne indicate God’s holiness. The term “seraphim” is associated with fire in Numbers 21:6¹² and “fire is everywhere associated with God’s holiness . . . so that it would be entirely appropriate for those who declare that holiness (v. 3) to be fiery in their appearance.”¹³ A few places in the chapter the Hebrew words are repeated in order to connote a superlative. Here the thrice repeated phrase connotes an ultimate superlative—the one being announced is the most holy being.¹⁴ This idea of repeating something three times is rarely found in Scripture so it is helpful to take note of another occurrence. In Jeremiah 7:4, the phrase, “this is the temple of the Lord,” is repeated three times to demonstrate the absolute trust the people had in the temple. Isaiah is stressing that the character of God is absolutely holy, which is later elaborated upon in Isaiah 40:25: “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One.” Therefore, we would expect the appearance of an absolutely holy God to mean that he would exude holiness across the whole earth. As we look at the phrasing in the announcement, the holiness of God on display does not fill the whole earth with his holiness, instead the whole earth is filled with his glory. The manifestation of God’s holiness is beheld in his glory. John Piper puts the two concepts together well when he writes, “[Holiness] is the intrinsic worth and transcendent purity. [Glory] is that worth and purity going public to be worshiped.”¹⁵

“‘feet’ are here a euphemism for the genital areas as in Exod 4:15 and Isa 7:20.” John Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 24, rev. ed. (Dallas: Word, 2004), 74.

¹²Because seraphim is a “term elsewhere applied to serpents (Num 21:6; Isa 14:29; 30:6), some scholars believe that they were serpentine or dragon like in appearance. However, the chief meaning of the term may be ‘fiery’ (so Num 21:6), so that the name of the snake is merely derivative (referring to their bite), and use of the term for the ministering beings would indicate they were ‘fiery ones.’” Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 178.

¹³*Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁴Herbert Wolf, *Interpreting Isaiah: The Suffering and Glory of the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 86. “The threefold repetition of ‘holy expresses the infinite holiness of God.”

¹⁵John Piper, “Unless God Gives You God,” sermon, June 5, 2015, accessed September 20, 2016, <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/unless-god-gives-you-god>.

Through this display of glory, Isaiah has his eyes opened to the pure unadulterated substance of worship; God as completely holy.

The effect the appearance of God has upon the temple is trembling. The booming voice is not even the one on the throne but his attendants announcing the arrival of his preeminence. I can remember seeing the Blue Angel Jets practicing their aeronautical routine over Louisville, Kentucky and the Ohio River which runs along the edge of the city. I was in the area for a conference in a downtown coliseum. As the jets came across the cityscape, they would turn up just before they reached the river right above the coliseum. The thundering roar of the jet engines was deafening. In the coliseum we glanced nervously at each other, as the building shook, out of concern that the steel structure may not be able to sustain such a rumbling. The foundations of the temple threshold shaking probably felt as if they may not sustain such a rumbling as Isaiah beheld the one announcing the Lord of hosts. And at that very same moment the temple filled with smoke and Isaiah was overcome by what he had seen. The very presence of God overwhelmed and overpowered the creation. God's presence has snuffed out every competing glory. Isaiah's retelling of that powerful moment is instructive—a proper position before God is first acknowledged when we become fully aware of God's holiness.

A Shaken Isaiah

In the sight of a holy God Isaiah immediately feels the inferiority of his own existence. The English Standard Version of the Bible translates this experience as being “lost,” and the King James Version perhaps more famously translates the same word as “undone.” However, it is seemingly more accurate to express the original Hebrew word with a more literal correspondence of being “ruined.”¹⁶ Taking this word into account, Isaiah is saying, “Woe is me! I am ruined.” In other words: Woe is me! I cannot exist in

¹⁶This translation may not be supported by the ESV or the KJV, but it is attested to by New American Standard Bible, New International Version, and Holman Christian Standard Bible.

the presence of this God. The reason Isaiah gives for his inability to exist in the presence of a holy God is his uncleanness: “I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5). “‘Unclean’ is a general term in the Old Testament for all that is, for whatever reason, unfit to be in God’s presence.”¹⁷ The reason Isaiah confines the uncleanness to his lips would appear to be because of his office. Ossai-Ugbah writes, “Even though he was in other respects a sinner, yet because the office which he held was holy, this part of his body was sacred.”¹⁸ Yet, even the most righteous portion of Isaiah is ruined in the sight of a holy God. It would seem that Isaiah is reflecting upon this experience when he later writes, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (Isa 64:6). It is helpful at this point to compare the experience of Isaiah’s calling with that of Jeremiah. Jeremiah receives a slightly different message in his calling than Isaiah did. Jeremiah is told, “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord” (Jer 1:8). Jeremiah is told not tremble because I am God and I am with you. Because God does not call all prophets the same way each time, we should take note of the contrasting points. Where Jeremiah is told not tremble, Isaiah on the other hand experiences the shaking of the temple and then he is shaken himself. Through this experience before a holy God, Isaiah’s confidence in his own righteousness is shaken to the point of falling apart.

As we notice the sequence of events, Isaiah has an admission of guilt for his uncleanness, only then do we find God’s response. God sends one of his seraphim to Isaiah with a burning coal. Before going any further, we should recognize the symbolism of the burning coal. For when the fire of God comes, it is an act of judgment. As one commentator explains, “In the Old Testament fire is not a cleansing agent but is symbolic

¹⁷Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, 59.

¹⁸Chika Diokpala Ossai-Ugbah, “Corruption and Societal Transformation: Exegesis 6:5-8,” *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 16 (January 2011): 139.

of the wrath of God (Gn. 3:24; Nu. 11:1-3).¹⁹ The symbolic nature of God's burning wrath is portrayed in the source of the coal—it is taken from the altar. Ossai-Ugbah writes, “The fire was taken from the altar, to intimate that it was divine or heavenly; for the law forbade any strange fire to be brought to it.”²⁰ Thus, it is through an act of righteous judgment that atonement takes place, and as the burning coal touches the lips of Isaiah his guilt is removed and his sin is atoned for. The symbolism of this moment should not be lost, because it is a reflection of the very work of Christ on the cross. As God's righteous wrath is poured out upon Jesus, the guilt of God's people is removed and sin is atoned.

Isaiah had fully seen who God is, so he is able to fully see himself. When we are confronted with a holy God, the only right response is to admit our complete insufficiency, and in the face of a holy God even when we are at our most righteous is like a filthy garment. When Isaiah makes the acknowledgment that he is ruined when compared with a holy God, then he graciously receives the atonement he so desperately needs. Like bleach removing a stain, all the sin he is guilty of is completely removed and Isaiah is able to appear before God on his throne. You too can have this very same experience, minus the seraphim and burning coal between your lips, by admitting your guiltiness to God he is willing and able to remove all your wrong doing, those moments you know it was no one else's fault but your own. God will fully make payment for the sin you are guilty of, all of it, by placing it upon his Son. Instead of removing a coal from the altar, he will place Jesus upon the altar to be a sacrificed in your place. God does not withhold his judgment and subsequent wrath; he pours it out of his Son in your place. Isaiah was shaken, but the result was his salvation.

¹⁹Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 78.

²⁰Ossai-Ugbah, “Corruption and Societal Transformation,” 140-41

Unshaken People

During his admission of guilt, Isaiah makes a connection that we would do well not to overlook. Isaiah is shaken because he acknowledges his position as being one with unclean lips. As a further admission of his guilt, he also acknowledges that he is among a people of “unclean lips” (Isa 6:5). This seems to be a fresh revelation to Isaiah. Ortlund explains, “For the first time, he sees that he’s typical of his generation, whose faith was unthinking and glib.”²¹ Thus, the same experience of sin removal and atonement that Isaiah experienced is also needed by the people. “Sinful Israel can become servant Israel when the experience of Isaiah becomes the experience of the nation.”²² Isaiah suggests that what is needed by people who have lost their way and find themselves in moral decline is to receive a burning coal to their lips. The people Isaiah finds himself surrounded by are in desperate need of a vision of the holy God that so affected the prophet Isaiah.

The need to be shaken was not experience only needed by the nation of Israel a few thousand years ago. The book of Isaiah makes the argument that the nations need to follow in the footsteps of Israel. In Isaiah 2:5, the people of the “house of Jacob” are urged to “walk in the light of the Lord.” Then in this same chapter the nations flow to “the house of the God of Jacob” (2:3). Isaiah 55:5 elaborates upon this idea: “Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, and of the Holy One of Israel.” By extension, we are part of the “people of unclean lips” spoken of by Isaiah as he beheld the glory of God on his throne. Then if we work backward from this point we are able to deduce what people in our day need. Just like Isaiah, we are in need of guilt removal and sin atonement. This will happen when, like Isaiah, we are shaken because we have seen ourselves as “ruined.” The feeling of being ruined comes from rightly perceiving God in his holiness.

²¹Ortlund, *Isaiah*, 79.

²²Oswalt, *Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, 174.

So we see Israel's need to be shaken, just as we see our own. In a strange twist, God tells Isaiah that the people of Israel will not be shaken: "Go, and say to this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull" (Isa 6:9). This is not the first time the eyes of the people have been blind to the work of God. Deuteronomy 29:4 says, "To this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear." Although, the blindness and deafness of the people has been a pattern in their experiences with God, its expression during Isaiah's ministry is especially pronounced. Isaiah the prophet repeatedly addresses the issue of blindness and deafness throughout his ministry, as is reflected in the book of Isaiah.²³ These blind and deaf passages have some distinct similarities. One of the most distinct similarities is the recurring theme of idolatry.²⁴ However, there is another aspect of commonality between the references to lack of sight and hearing—the general understanding that the remedy will be found in the future day of the Lord. For instance, Isaiah 43 tells that in the day of salvation God will bring out the people who are called by his name to be redeemed. One of the groups he will bring out is described in 43:8: "Bring out the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears!" From this verse and ones like it in Isaiah, an expectation can be identified—in the day of salvation the blindness and deafness will be reversed.²⁵ Therefore, Isaiah's experience of having his eyes opened to his need of atonement foreshadows the church's

²³See Isa 11:1-5; 29:18; 35:5; 42:7; 42:18-19; 43:8; 56:10.

²⁴Gregory Beale, "Isaiah VI 9-13: A Retributive Taunt Against Idolatry," *Vetus Testamentum* 41 (1991): 257-78.

²⁵Isa 11:1-5 describes the reversal of the condition presented in Isa 6:10 is found in the righteous branch from the "stump of Jesse." Isa 29:18 presents the idea of the blind receiving sight is connected to the eschaton. Isa 35:5 tells that in the eschatological day of salvation (35:4), the "eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped." Isa 42:7 suggests that I the light of a Messianic expectation (42:1-4), the Lord will provide a covenant that will "open the eyes of the blind." Isa 43:8, in the day of salvation God will bring out the "people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears," that they may be redeemed.

experience because of the work of Christ. The writers of the New Testament fully realize that Jesus is the one who will give sight and hearing. Beale writes, “In fact, Isaiah 6:9-10 is a commission that the prophet is to fulfill, and Jesus understands that it ‘is fulfilled again’ . . . in him. Isaiah’s ministry was a historical foreshadowing of the even greater ministry of Jesus.”²⁶

So as we look to the New Testament and read the words of Jesus, and others, speaking to blind and deaf people it becomes apparent that “the inability to believe in the face of signs is not rooted in unwillingness—else Pharaonic hardening would be more appropriate—but rather to the absence of salvific wisdom.”²⁷ In the first three gospels this passage in Isaiah 6:9-10 is quoted by Jesus to explain why he speaks in parables. Jesus tells that the ability to rightly see and understand is given to people through divine wisdom. Then John explains in his gospel that not even seeing signs and miracles allowed the eyes and ears of the blind and deaf to be opened. It is not a matter of the people needing to look harder—God must reveal himself. What people today need is not a series of signs to win them over, or for the church to look like the world so people can more easily see Jesus. People need precisely the same vision Isaiah had—God revealing his holiness to a people of unclean lips in such a way that they are shaken by the presence of a holy God and therefore recognize the magnitude of their sin.

Conclusion: Are We Shaken?

Our country is in moral decline, and we would be naïve to think what people need is a church they can relate to or a worship experience that helps a lost person feel more comfortable. What people desperately need is to be shaken in the midst of a shaken people. We need to clearly see God’s holiness on display to such a degree that we realize

²⁶Gregory Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 136.

²⁷Donald Hartley, “Destined to Disobey; Isaiah 6:10 in John 12:37-41,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 44 (November 2009): 270.

we have nothing to stand on; we are utterly ruined. When we realize our complete inability to produce righteousness on our own, then we are in a position to cry out to God, “Woe is me.”

I heard a personal testimony by a college age young woman who had grown up in church. She said she thought she was a Christian, but it was all based upon a false assumption about her need for Jesus. She knew she could not be perfect and she needed Jesus. She described her need for a savior as filling up a container. She was pretty good so she was able to fill up the container about 60 to 75 percent herself, and she thought Jesus would fill it up the rest of the way. She then heard the gospel clearly for the first time and realized that even her most righteous deeds were filthy rags, and she was absolutely incapable of adding one drop to the container—she needed Jesus to fill it all the way up.

We have unclean lips and we live among a people of unclean lips and we must recognize that we are utterly ruined because of our complete lack of righteousness. We need to be shaken and the people around us need to be shaken. However, we do not get there by telling people how bad they are; we get there by telling people how holy God is. The goal should not be to convince people that something is lacking in their lives, but to give them a vision of God’s holiness.

CHAPTER 4

SERMON 3: GLORY OF A JUST GOD

Are you on the right side of history? We all want to look back on our lives in our twilight years and feel as if we made the right choices on major issues. We even want to feel like we supported the right causes. To put it another way we want to have been on the “right side” of history. It is for this reason that many modern issues have been compared to the civil rights movement of the Martin Luther King, Jr., era. No one wants to look back on their lives only to realize they did not support the major “civil rights” style issues of their day. In recent years, gay marriage has been compared to the civil rights movement.¹ We would hate to find out that not supporting a specific issue now led us to be considered prejudicial or bigoted in the future. If we could just see into the future, then we might have a completely different perspective on which side of the modern issues we should come down on. One of the beautiful things about the Bible is it gives an eternal perspective, so we can look far into the future and discern what will be most significant in the end. Isaiah 24 provides just such a look.

Behold, the LORD will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the LORD has spoken this word. The earth mourns and withers; the world languishes and withers; the highest people of the earth languish. The earth lies defiled under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left. The wine mourns, the vine languishes, all the merry-

¹See Jaime Fuller, “Is Gay Rights a Civil Rights Issue? Two Lawyers from Opposite Ends of the Ideological Spectrum say, ‘Yes,’” *The Washington Post*, April 8, 2014, accessed October 22, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2014/04/08/is-gay-rights-a-civil-rights-issue-two-lawyers-from-opposite-ends-of-the-ideological-spectrum-say-yes/?utm_term=.48734dc00991.

hearted sigh. The mirth of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled. No more do they drink wine with singing; strong drink is bitter to those who drink it. The wasted city is broken down; every house is shut up so that none can enter. There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine; all joy has grown dark; the gladness of the earth is banished. Desolation is left in the city; the gates are battered into ruins. For thus it shall be in the midst of the earth among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, as at the gleaning when the grape harvest is done. They lift up their voices, they sing for joy; over the majesty of the LORD they shout from the west. Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD; in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One. But I say, "I waste away, I waste away. Woe is me! For the traitors have betrayed, with betrayal the traitors have betrayed." Terror and the pit and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth! He who flees at the sound of the terror shall fall into the pit, and he who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the snare. For the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth tremble. The earth is utterly broken, the earth is split apart, the earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunken man; it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again. On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be confounded and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts reigns on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his glory will be before his elders.

Some passages of Scripture can be difficult, and may even challenge our modern sensibilities, and Isaiah 24 is no exception. The idea that God would utterly destroy the earth and all its inhabitants feels unbelievable. Then to have a group of people praising God for his act of judgment may lead us to question the integrity of the people giving such praise or even the one receiving it. However, the passage that we might find unnerving or even disagree with at first glance often ends up involving the greatest opportunity for growth. Digging through this passage and beginning to discern the message Isaiah is conveying in this futuristic vision can have a profound effect upon our faith.

Isaiah 24 is teaching that we should not delight in the misery of others, but we should rejoice in a just God displaying his wrath. The difficult idea of rejoicing in a just God displaying his wrath raises two questions to be answered. First, how can we make such a claim by suggesting that people should praise God for his expression of wrath? Second, is there any possible application this side of heaven? The answer to these two questions includes a four step process of acknowledging (1) the coming destruction, (2) its

causes, 3) its being in accord with God's purposes (4) and it deserving a proper response from Christians.

Coming Destruction

Ahaz, the current king in Jerusalem, has not taken the holiness of God seriously, and in particular he disregarded the opportunity to receive a sign from God in chapter 7. The result of his rejection is that "the Assyrians will denude the land and famine conditions will prevail."² Therefore, the prophet Isaiah, in chapters 13-27, prophesies the coming wrath of God beginning with Ahaz and his countrymen. In particular, "the background for [Isaiah 24:1-13] is the Assyrian invasions of the land the successive traumas of the fall of Samaria and desolation of Judah."³ Isaiah is prophesying to the nation of Israel of their destruction and is suggesting it is a foretaste of the destruction the entire planet will ultimately experience, as described in Isaiah 24.

Everything is destroyed by human hands. Al Gore's prognostications about the earth meeting its final demise due to the actions of humanity are actually correct, but not for the reasons Al Gore and other proponents of climate change would imagine.⁴ God is bringing this world to an end, however, it is not because of a failure to regulate emissions but a failure to regulate morality. Isaiah had spoken about the destruction of Israel and her enemies, but "no longer is it Babylon or Damascus or Tyre being confronted by God; now it is the earth itself (repeated 17 times [in this chapter]) which stands before the bar of judgment."⁵ With language reminiscent of the flood, Isaiah describes the neighbors that will be destroyed. Isaiah wants us to make the connection with the flood narrative as

²Duane Garrett, *The Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, forthcoming), 21.

³Ibid.

⁴See Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Rodale, 2006).

⁵John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 444.

a way of deepening our understanding. The parallels to the flood can be noticed first in the theme of global destruction. For instance, 24:6 provides a general description of the state of humanity: “A curse devours the earth and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt.” We can clearly see the parallels being drawn between this phrase and Genesis 3 when God placed a curse upon all of humanity because of the fall. Sin began with Adam and then spread to all men to such an extent that the earth was inhabited by wicked people. The state of being of the inhabitants of the earth is described in Genesis 6:11: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.” Another point of correspondence is found in the specific language used in Genesis 6-9 and Isaiah 24. Isaiah 24:18 describes God’s judgment as pouring out on the earth when “the windows of heaven are opened, and the foundations of the earth tremble.” This phrase is reminiscent of Genesis 7:11: “The fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.” Another parallel is found in the mention of the everlasting covenant being broken in Isaiah 24:5, which was established in Noah’s day immediately following the flood (Gen. 9:16).⁶ As Seitz points out, the idea that Isaiah is connecting the global destruction in Isaiah 24 to the flood in Noah’s day is compounded by “the key role the sea played as agent of destruction in chapters 21-23 [of Isaiah].”⁷ And like in the days of Noah, God’s wrath and destruction will be poured out on everyone, regardless of

⁶Further evidence of a flood correlating to this passage is found in Isa 24:6. Moyter points out, “The ‘curse,’ in the context of the wine/vine theme of verse 7, links with Noah and the vine-dresser and the imposition of the curse in the post-diluvian world (Gen 9:20, 25).” J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah; An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 200. Some have argued against the idea that Isaiah is making reference to the flood narrative in Gen 6-9. One such argument is made by Donald Polaski when he suggests that the reference to an “eternal covenant” is actually making reference to the Mosaic covenant. His focus is upon the phrase *בְּרִית עוֹלָם* and its use in relation to the nation of Israel, the Mosaic covenant, and in particular Deut 28-32. The argument made by Donald Polaski is nuanced and specific, but connecting *בְּרִית עוֹלָם* to specific elements of the Mosaic covenant undermines the thrust of the passage which has a global perspective. See Donald Polaski, “Reflections on a Mosaic Covenant: The Eternal Covenant (Isaiah 24.5) and Intertextuality,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1998): 55-73. Christopher Seitz shows the fallacy of this argument when he writes, “This is not a covenant with Israel only (Mosaic) that has been broken, but one with the entire cosmos and every nation on earth.” Christopher Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 180.

⁷Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39*, 180.

economic status, position, or even religion. “As with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with the master; as with the maid, so with her mistress” (Isa 24:2). In other words, you can do nothing to earn favor with God. To great extent, the inability to earn God’s favor is what sets Christians apart from all other religions. Christians believe that there is nothing we can do to receive God’s favor, and ultimately God’s wrath will be poured out like a flood on all earth’s inhabitants regardless of how much they have worked to put themselves in God’s good graces. However, the message of this passage is not entirely doom and gloom, which is why it is helpful to notice the flood language of the passage; despite God’s act of global destruction during the time of Noah he provided a remnant. Brueggemann writes, “Only then, like Noah, will the burned remnant emerge from the ark to offer sacrifice and praise.”⁸ Therefore, the hope of being redeemed comes through judgment, not apart from it, but before we come to the redeemed remnant we must dig further into the plight of those being destroyed.

Isaiah 24:4-13 forms a shift in the writing of the chapter, for these verses are written as a lament poem or song from the perspective of those who are being destroyed.⁹ Although this passage takes place in the future, it is written as a completed action.¹⁰ It is as if the events “are so vivid to the prophet’s eyes that he pictures them as though they had already transpired.”¹¹ We too must learn from the reality of these future events and should begin by discerning how the recipients of God’s wrath found themselves in such a position. Of course we have talked about the transgression described in verse 5 of the people’s complete disregard for the everlasting covenant. Then, in the subsequent verses

⁸Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39*, 184.

⁹Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 192.

¹⁰Edward Young, *The Book of Isaiah; Chapters 19-39* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 154, writes, “Up to this point he has placed the description in the future, using either the perfect with *waw* consecutive or else participles or even simple futures. Beginning with this verse, however, he employs perfects.”

¹¹*Ibid.*

we see the reality of living in a world that has abandoned God's everlasting covenant. Verse 10 says, "The wasted city is broken down; every house is shut up so that none can enter." Picture vacant city streets with each house shut up: doors closed, blinds drawn, bars across the windows, and alarms set. The only thing that breaks the silence of these vacant streets is people crying out for more wine. The people, in the city of man, want to cope with the decaying cursed world so they are turning to every form of comfort they can find. In chapter 25, the people are described in graphic detail as being drunkards, even the prophets and priests are making themselves sick on alcohol. Verses 24:10-11 describe a world in which people are afraid to go outside and are crying out for wine because they want anything they can get their hands on to take their minds off of the cursed fallen world. They want an escape from reality.

Distractions like alcohol are pervasive in our day and age: drugs, food, pornography, Netflix, or mindless games. Any of these can divert attention from reality, regardless of how temporary that diversion may be. Probably, many of us have had family or friends who have coped with tragedy or hardship by consuming alcohol or drugs in an attempt to avoid reality. Sometimes our escapes from reality seem much more innocent. I was with a mission team in Washington, DC, a couple of years ago and about midway through the trip we felt like we had gotten a grasp of the subway system, which is called the METRO in local vernacular. As we wrapped up our day we decided to hop on the METRO, not taking into account that it was the middle of evening rush hour. We were surrounded by professionals in suits armed with smart phones, and I was certain we were crammed in a METRO car with political elites wielding power and influence over the nation. One such professionally dressed woman sat down on the backside of the bench we were occupying. I could hear as her nails clicked against the glass screen of her iPhone. I did what any nosey person would do, I glanced over my shoulder to see what she was fervently working on. I knew for sure that she was a presidential advisor unleashing a

series of policies in top secret emails. As my eyes met her phone screen I watched as she completed the next level of Candy Crush.

We live in a world that would prefer to be distracted—while Candy Crush is somewhat anecdotal, it is imbelamatic of a larger issue. For in the quiet moments we may find ourselves drifting off into a world of regret, hurt, loneliness, or a host of other uncomfortable emotions, and just like the people of Isaiah’s day we would rather have one more distraction than think about the possible consequences of living in a sinful world. Instead of turning to God in repentance we seek to live in an alternate reality.

In the passage we are working the through, the people calling out for wine are perhaps one step ahead of us in 2016, at least many of us. For these people have come to find an insufficiency in distractions. Verse 9 says, “No more do they drink wine with singing; strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.” Isaiah is describing a people for whom alcohol is not enough to make their spirits glad. For the people in this city, the mechanism for dulling the pain and distracting themselves from their sin-cursed world is losing its effectiveness. When the enjoyment brought on by wine is gone and the merriment and carelessness of life is decimated under the burden of a global curse brought on by their guilt (Isa 24:6), the people do not recognize a need to turn to God. Young describes their condition: “The rejoicers of heart are all too often those who forget God; when He deprives them of their luxury, they do no turn to Him, but sigh at their own supposed misfortune.”¹²

Isaiah depicts their state of despair by suggesting that the music of life is gone: “The mirth of the tambourines is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled” (24: 8). The musicians have no reason to play. There is a death to be had even while one is still living, and the people were trying to remove the sting of living death by any means possible. Just as the people cried out for more wine, more numbing, and more distraction we too live in a world crying out for the same things—a way to

¹²Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 161.

escape reality. Instead of addressing sin and repenting of it, these people wanted to distract themselves. Some may think that Christians want to live in an alternate universe of God, angels, and heaven. Christians are not trying to avoid reality, but instead are able to embrace the realities of this world—a world in which God condemns and judges the guilty. So how did these people so desperate for distractions end up in such a dire position?

Cause

The only way to understand the judgment being experienced is to grasp the cause. Isaiah depicts the coming destruction by employing the image of a city. This is the very image picked up on by Augustine of Hippo in his famous work *The City of God*. Augustine describes two cities: The City of God and the City of Man. We will see all too many parallels between our own modern cities and the city of man described first by Isaiah and then Augustine. For at the time when Augustine wrote his book he was grappling with the sacking of Rome by the Goths in AD 410. A similar grappling has taken place in the twenty-first century. “It was like Muslim fundamentalist bringing down the World Trade Center in New York. It was the end of an era—the end of security, the beginning of uncertainty.”¹³ In the face of this uncertainty, Augustine began to see the world falling into one of two camps: the city of man and the city of God. The city of man is defined as all those against God. Ortlund writes, “The nations and cultures and businesses and ideas and trends and politics and moralities of this present age, however much they disagree on the surface, are in fact unified at the profoundest level. They are all against God.”¹⁴ And although we are roughly 1,600 years removed from Augustine, his ability to describe the heart of modern man is remarkable. Augustine defines the cities of God and man: “Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt

¹³Ray Ortlund, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 141.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord.”¹⁵ He describes the people and places that will be destroyed as the city of man, and these are the people under examination in Isaiah 24. For all people who have rejected God, by rejecting his Son, will face God’s wrath: eternal destruction with no escape.

We may be part of the remnant but at the same time struggle to accept the idea of God destroying the majority of the people on earth. It may even bother us that God would have done such a feat during the time of Noah. We are compelled to ask how failure to reach God’s standard, the everlasting covenant, can cause someone’s destruction or the whole world’s destruction for that matter.

Last February a man standing in a cage was set on fire by ISIS. The terrorist group made the video available online and the world was horrified by this unspeakable act of evil. The thought ran through my head that such a level of cruelty should never exist. By God’s providence, the next day I was reading through the laws in the Old Testament, and the portion of Scripture I was reading described a set of punishments for particular sins. Reading these verses in close proximity to the horrific events carried out by ISIS was a graphic reminder that there is a catastrophic seriousness to sin. To be appalled that the Bible would contain such punishment is to not be appalled enough by sin. Overlooking sin or diminishing its seriousness is to misunderstand the character of God. King Ahaz seems to have fallen prey to this very same fallacy. He thought very little of God’s holiness and his righteous judgment. However, in the end God will pour out his wrath upon sinners, and this is God’s just judgment upon a world that has rejected him. “The Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate” (Isa 24:1). So while we agree that Christians should care for God’s creation. We must also acknowledge, contrary to Al

¹⁵Saint Augustine, *The City of God: Saint Augustine*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 569.

Gore's aspirations, that there is no saving the earth. We are not trying to save the here and now, we are trying to save people from the here and now.

God's Position

Isaiah 24 not only describes the global destruction of the earth and its inhabitants, but also the character of the God who is pouring out his wrath. R. G. Lee was a famous Baptist pastor in the middle of the twentieth century, and even served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Lee was perhaps most well-known for his sermon "Payday Someday." This sermon lays out the story of Elijah dealing with Ahab and his conniving wife Jezebel. As Lee comes to the end of his sermon he makes a very poignant statement: "The retributive providence of God is a reality as certainly as the laws of gravitation are a reality."¹⁶ There is a day, already marked on God's calendar, when he will bring everything on earth below and heaven above to an end. Lee was certain of the earth coming to a close, to its fiery end. This same sentiment is expressed in the opening words to verse 21: "On that day the Lord will punish." The punishment, spoken of by Lee and Isaiah, is only made certain because God is the agent carrying it out. God is the one who will bring everything on earth to a close and then sit in judgment over the earth and its inhabitants. We should make no mistake, it is God carrying out the destruction, but we will probably find ourselves asking: What sort of God does this? Isaiah has set us up to ask this question because he wants us to reinterpret our view of God's judgment.¹⁷

It might be easy to describe God's final act of judgment as "terrifying," but Isaiah uses a different adjective to describe God's act of final judgment, namely,

¹⁶R. G. Lee, "Payday Someday" (sermon preached at Bellvue Baptist Church, Memphis, TN, 1926), accessed October 22, 2015, <http://www.sermonindex.net/modules/articles/index.php?view=article&aid=2640>.

¹⁷Marvin Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 328, explains, "The subunit [Isaiah 24:14-23] is constituted according to the prophetic disputation pattern, which challenges an assertion made by the prophet's opponents and then presents the prophet's counter assertion together with a different interpretation of the situation at hand."

“glorious.” The final three verses of chapter 24 comprise a literary unit. In this section, the prophet first describes the coming punishment from God and then he shifts his attention to the character of the one inflicting the punishment. The last phrase of the passage provides a definition of his character: “His glory will be before his elders.” The God of punishment is a glorious being. Oswalt writes, “The picture in Revelation complements this one nicely (Rev 4:4, 9-11).”¹⁸ The elders in Revelation 4 are seen bowing before the throne, not because they are fearful for their lives after seeing God’s judgment, but as an act of awe inspired worship. They express their worship through a continuous refrain: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and praise” (Rev 4:11). God’s act of judgment is worthy of praise because it is an expression of his glorious character, as recognized by the elders.

The glory he possesses is unlike anything humanity has experienced. Isaiah wants us to see the magnitude of his glory, and he conveys the extent of God’s glory by using astronomy. “Then the moon will be confounded, and the sun ashamed” (Isa 24:23). The glory of God is brighter and more vibrant than the moon or even the sun. Herbert Wolf explains, “No longer will the light of the sun or the moon be needed. The glory of the Lord will outshine them both.”¹⁹ The final act of judgment is horrific for those who are perishing, and yet at the same time it is a display of his glorious character.

As we compile the elements of this final section in Isaiah 24, we see: “Once these are defeated ‘in that day,’ God’s final and victorious reign will be fully established. The purpose of God’s final visitation will be to bring low the powers on earth (24:21b, 22) and in the heavens (24:21a, 23a), leaving God himself as the reigning king (24:23b).”²⁰ We find comfort and joy in the final victory of God. Believers can confidently trust that

¹⁸Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 456.

¹⁹Herbert Wolf, *Interpreting Isaiah: The Suffering and Glory of the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985) 140.

²⁰Gary Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, New American Commentary, vol. 15a (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 424.

God is in control of history. There is no doom for the planet apart from the one brought on by God, and those who have placed their trust and faith in him will participate in his victory. So we find encouragement to live in light of a coming judgment.

A cancer diagnosis can come with a life expectancy, and almost regardless of what amount of time is included in the life expectancy it tends to change how one interacts with this world. The realization that we are operating within a finite amount of time produces a certain clarity, and from this clarity we develop a desire to prioritize our life differently. The final section of Isaiah 24 should function in much the same way; our priorities should be restricted around the close of the age. We see an example of how to live in light of the coming judgment and close of the age by the remnant described by Isaiah earlier in this chapter.

Our Response

Sandwiched between the catastrophic events of global destruction is a peculiar song by the remnant who will be saved, praising God for his wrath. Isaiah 24:14-16 opens with a complete reversal of fortunes from those wishing for more wine because the music of life has escaped them. It is like a group of prisoners rejoicing in their jail cells. Rejoicing by prisoners would seem out of place in such a grim depressing environment of metal bars and concrete walls, except for the news these prisoners have just discovered. They are going to be set free because of presidential pardon. The delight in a gracious offer of release would bring a smile to any prisoner's face, and it would liven their step and bring the music of life back again. In a very similar manner, the music of life has not evaporated for those whom God has chosen to spare. The people are a remnant, a group of people who will be spared the wrath of God.²¹ And although the remnant has not been

²¹Some have dismissed any connection of the pronoun "they" in v. 14 with the preceding section. See Brevard Childs, *The Book of Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 451. However, others such as J. A. Motyer, Gary Smith, Edward Young, and Herbert Wolf have shown the intentionality by Isaiah to connect "they" with the remnant spoken in the preceding verses. The most compelling argument comes from Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 206: "The emphatic pronoun merits

fully removed from the miserable experience of God's wrath, they lift "up their voices, they sing for joy" (Isa 24:14).

The remnant has recognized the character of God as glorious and is alive and well with praises. Their praise has four facets, the first of which is the magnification of God's supremacy in verse 14.²² For God's reign over man, put on display by his global judgment, may at first glance be thought of as horrific, but in this verse is described as majestic. Then the next verse describes the second facet of praise, the remnant gives glory to God. If we follow the logic of Isaiah 6:3 and realize that God's glory is the display of his holy character, then we are able to conclude from this verse that people across the earth see the judgment of God as a display of his holy character. Thirdly, and also in verse 15, we see the exaltation of God's name. Yahweh, the God of Israel, is praised above all others. Lastly, and perhaps the most difficult form of praise, the people give "glory to the Righteous One." They view the God of global destruction as being in right standing and having taken just action.

So we find instruction in this final facet of praise, for we should not be appalled at God's act of judgment but embrace it as just and right. For "the result of judgment will be the universal praise of the true God."²³ The remnant praising God appears to have been awaiting the day when God would destroy sin, and rejoicing when it takes place. For them, the destruction of sin is the music of life. How often have we thought of the destruction of sin as the music of life and worth praising God over? So they delight in the day when sin is put to death. From this example we are able to see the right response to

translating as 'These are they who . . . identifying these newcomers on the scene with the 'gleanings' of verse 13 and the 'few' of verse 6, who now lift up their voice.'" Motyer makes a compelling argument from the stand point of the intertextual connections. His argument is bolstered by the simple fact that the content in the song in vv. 14-16a is one of jubilant rejoicing over God's judgment and is placed in contrast to those seeking more wine. Beyond the remnant, who could rejoice in this manner?

²²Each of these four facets of praise is adapted from Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, 421.

²³Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 170.

God's wrath, praise. When faith and repentance destroy the addictive pattern in the life of an alcoholic we are given cause to rejoice because sin has been destroyed. When an adulterous affair ends, we thank God. When a computer virus destroys the servers of a pornographic website, we have cause to praise God for this destruction. You may be tempted to think, "Well that was someone's livelihood so I am not sure we should be praising God or calling it the music of life." The remnant praising God in Isaiah 24 has seen the destruction of earth and they lift up their voices and sing for joy. Then we are confronted by the clearest evidence of rejoicing over the destruction of sin: when a person repents of sin and turns to faith in Christ it is right to praise God for this destruction of sin in their lives. And we are left with the hope that this form of destruction will be global as well.

Through each of these four facets of praise we must make a distinction; the remnant does not focus on the people who have been judged or the punishment they are experiencing. No, the focus is entirely upon God. Young writes, "This worship focuses completely on God. It is a response to his revelation of his majestic supremacy over man through his powerful acts."²⁴ This praise is a lesson to us of heaven. I have heard it asked, how can Christians suggest that there will not be any tears in heaven, when there will be so many people in hell that they once loved on earth. We can learn from the remnant singing praise in these verses. The people in heaven will so rightly see God's act of judgment as being righteous that they will actually praise him for acting in the way he did. Therefore, the focus will be entirely upon him and his glory; this is the proper response by the remnant to God's display of wrath.

Conclusion

The people in the city of man are described as looking for the distractions earth can produce in order to make it through another day. The music of life has dissipated and

²⁴Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, 170.

the plight of these people has been brought on by their transgression of the everlasting covenant. The destiny of the city of man and its inhabitant is the wrath of God.

The remnant singing the praises of God are not simply a small group in Israel during Isaiah's day. This notion is brought out when Isaiah steps back to see the entire planet all at one time. From this protracted position Isaiah is able to show that the remnant has covered the world to the "ends of the earth" (24:16). He sees people from the east to the west praising God. The oddity of international praise being sung to God should not be overlooked because God is described in this passage as the "God of Israel" (24:15). This is a key distinction, because throughout Isaiah that the God of Israel will one day redeem his children. Now people across the planet are described as being the children of God—those set to inherit the redemption of God—and the hope of a life filled with music is made available for all God's children on a global scale. There is no need to fill the still quiet moments with distractions, because all the regret, hurt, and heartache that may flood our minds is overcome by the forgiving action of a faithful God. Now we have nothing left to fear and we are actually able to embrace solitude.

At the same time, there is a clear example of how the remnant, the children of God, should respond to the wrath of God. We desire for God's justice to take place without delight in destruction. The adverse is also true; we do not hope that God's justice be removed, but that sin be destroyed.

CHAPTER 5

SERMON 4: COMFORT IN THE FACE OF DISASTER

“This flood disaster has been like nothing [South Carolina] has ever seen.”¹

When the governor, Nikki Haley, posted this message to her Twitter feed in October 2015, it came as a call to action for First Calvary Baptist Church. We began immediately working with the South Carolina Baptist Disaster Relief Coordinator, and a team from our church was on the ground before the flooding completely subsided. The team from First Calvary immediately went to work in one of the hardest hit areas and began removing flooring, sheet rock, cabinetry, and furniture from homes affected by the flood water. One house in particular was home to a single mother of two boys who had immigrated from South Africa. The first moment she was able to get back into her house, she did the only thing she knew to do; she began calling companies specializing in water removal. She finally convinced a company to send a crew out that day for an emergency fee of \$2000. They removed a little over half of the effected materials and left the rest as they headed for another job site. She was left with no money, an unlivable house, and a sense of betrayal.

When our team pulled up in the driveway, a frustrated and disappointed mother who did not want to invite anyone else into her home greeted us. After being taken advantage of in one of her darkest hours, this woman needed a word of comfort. As we explained, we were a church group that had been trained for this very task and we were all volunteers, so there would be no charges associated with our work—she began to breathe a sigh of relief. Her comfort came not only in having the job done, but also in the

¹Nikki Haley, Twitter, accessed October 4, 2015, <https://twitter.com/nikkihaley/status/650782978109517824>.

confidence that she could trust the group she was letting in her home. Isaiah wants us to know this very same comfort based upon trust even in our darkest hour.

At that time Merodach-baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. And Hezekiah welcomed them gladly. And he showed them his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them. Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah, and said to him, "What did these men say? And from where did they come to you?" Hezekiah said, "They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon." He said, "What have they seen in your house?" Hezekiah answered, "They have seen all that is in my house. There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them." Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD. And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon." Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good." For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my days." (39:1-8)

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (40:1-5)

Investigation

Isaiah has intentionally laid out the events of Hezekiah's, King of Judah, life in the wrong order. For Isaiah 38-39 come in the midst of chapters 36-37. Isaiah 36-37 end on a victorious note, but chapters 38-39 end on a note of future destruction. Isaiah is strategically placing the events of future destruction in concert with the opening refrain of chapter 40, "comfort, comfort." Isaiah has organized his writing in this way because we must first see the destruction awaiting Israel before we can appreciate the message of comfort. The prophecy of destruction comes in two forms: the failure of Hezekiah and the confrontation with Hezekiah, and the message of comfort also has two components: the trustworthiness of God and the messenger of God.

Failure of Hezekiah

We are considering chapters 39-40, but to properly set the stage for these chapters we must look back to chapter 38, when the prophet Isaiah pronounced Hezekiah terminally ill with only a short time to live. Hezekiah experienced what I have seen other terminally ill patients experience; they feel like the news of the illness is so grievous that they are left overwhelmed and helpless. So he did what many others have done when confronted with the same diagnosis, he cried out to God for help (Isa 38:2). God answered Hezekiah's prayer by adding fifteen years to his life (38:4). The passage we have just read picks up Hezekiah's story just as he is regaining his strength as part of a full recovery. To help him celebrate his recovery, an envoy from Babylon arrives on the scene with something like a fruit basket and get well balloons from the gift shop. The Babylonians wanted to make strategic alliances with countries that could possibly help them win the fight against Assyria.

We have seen similar scenarios in our day. In the past few years we have seen Ukraine become a focal point of Russian aggression and United States protection. The Russians have occupied portions of the Ukraine. On the other hand, the US has provided military and financial support so they might defend themselves. The real struggle is between the two world powers, but the Ukraine has found itself receiving special attention. Hezekiah finds himself in a Ukrainian-like position, but he does not seem to recognize it as such.

Hezekiah receives the Babylonian well-wishers and is so flattered by their visit that he begins to show them around the kingdom. "There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them" (Isa 39:2). The Babylonians appear to respond in grandparent-style fashion. My kids receive grandparent praise for the slightest bit of effort; grandparents ooh and awe over the most trivial display. For grandparents such action is appropriate, but for a foreign ambassador it is empty flattery. In all reality, Hezekiah is not showing off his vast wealth, he is showing off his foolishness. This would be like showing off a twenty-five-story building, the largest in downtown Columbia,

South Carolina, to the owner of a New York skyscraper, like Donald Trump.² Clearly, Hezekiah would be flattering himself to think that he had riches impressive enough to gain the favor of the Babylonians. Hezekiah's offense was not only foolish but it was sinful. Before we get to the most blatant sin, we must see what is missing or omitted. Hezekiah is guilty of the sin of omission.

The description Isaiah 39 provides, of Hezekiah's sickness and the Babylonian get well tour, finds a parallel in 2 Chronicles 32. Of particular importance is 2 Chronicles 32:31: "And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart." When God left Hezekiah to himself, he was looking to see if this earthly king would acknowledge the Lord as his source of strength. Hezekiah failed to recognize God as his source of strength. Oswalt explains, "This kind of reliance upon, and delight in, human power and glory is exactly what the first half of the book is warning against."³ The desire to be perceived as strong is understandable, for "Hezekiah would have been very glad to have the support of Babylon as he contemplated the impending arrival of the Assyrian army to put down either of the West Semitic revolts."⁴ He might have felt silly saying, "Everything I have was given to me by God. And honestly I would be dead right now if it wasn't for him." Instead, Hezekiah wanted to demonstrate a show of strength, he did not want to come across as weak and reliant upon God. This was from a man who just experienced the overwhelming work and power of God in providing healing from a terminal disease. Despite his first-

²M. and J. Wilkow, Ltd., "Property Overview," accessed October 4, 2015, http://www.1201main.com/site/epage/106181_971.htm.

³John Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 695.

⁴*Ibid.*, 694.

hand knowledge of God's ability to overcome our most dire circumstances, he fails by omitting the praise and trust that was due God.

Mature Christians must learn from Hezekiah's sin of omission. Mature Christians have walked with Christ long enough to see his hand at work in their lives. However, mature Christians can still fail to acknowledge their dependence upon God. More mature Christians may have found themselves in the very same position as Hezekiah, namely, they have received news from the doctor that they have contracted a terminal illness. Then after a handful of procedures by the best doctoral care available, that very same Christian is completely healed. When questioned about their seemingly miraculous deliverance from a devastating diagnosis, they do not attribute all the praise to God. Instead, the mature Christian cites the incredible doctoral care they were able to acquire as what made all the difference. "If we had not been able to get into a Clinical trial I don't think there would have been any hope of overcoming such a horrific disease." To be honest, when one first receives a horrifying diagnosis, we feel just like Hezekiah must have felt, helpless and ready to fall to our knees begging God to intervene. Then, upon hearing the news that we were completely healed and will have no lasting repercussions we fail to give the credit to God. A sin of omission.

Confrontation with Hezekiah

As the Babylonian convoy exits the kingdom, the prophet Isaiah approaches Hezekiah. Isaiah has come bearing questions for the recently recovered king. He begins innocently enough by asking, "What did these men say? And from where did they come to you?" Isaiah's question is not one of naiveté, but "the real significance of the questions is to lead the king to commit himself in his reply in such a way that prophetic comment upon his actions follows as a direct sequel to his own involvement."⁵ Hezekiah's

⁵P. R. Ackroyd, "An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile: A Study of 2 Kings 20, Isaiah 38-39," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 27 (1974): 334.

response indicates that he may have known Isaiah was up to something, so he only answers the second half of Isaiah's question: "They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon" (Isa 39:3). Hezekiah seems to be giving Isaiah the answer he thinks will answer all questions. "Does it really matter what they said . . . they were from *Babylon*." Instead of out maneuvering Isaiah with his response, Hezekiah actually further implicates himself. For Isaiah is about to turn the tables on Hezekiah concerning Babylon, the far off country. Before Isaiah lands his prophetic punch, he has one more question: "What have they seen in your house?" (Isa 39:4). Hezekiah answers with a sense of indignation. He tells Isaiah emphatically that he showed his visitors everything and he repeats this assertion: "There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them" (Isa 39:4). The questioning has a dual focus both supplied by Hezekiah himself. P. R. Ackroyd writes, "The place from which the ambassadors have come – a far country, Babylon; it has also repeated the theme of 'everything'—'not a single thing' has be left unviewed."⁶ Isaiah has positioned Hezekiah so that he will have ears to hear the prophecy from the Lord.

"Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon" (Isa 39:5). Everything Hezekiah had shown to his visitors will be carried to a country far off. Isaiah stresses the force of the prophecy by adding, "Some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon" (Isa 39:7).⁷ Despite the fact that Hezekiah is not the final king of Judah and his son is his immediate successor, Isaiah has made a remarkable

⁶Ackroyd, "An Interpretation of the Babylonian Exile," 334.

⁷The term translated as "eunuchs" by the ESV (and many other versions including the AV and NIV) can be rendered "officials" as is the case in the NASB. Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 710, suggest that the term "eunuch" is a "specialized meaning" of the word. Regardless of whether the term's specialized meaning is being employed in this case or not, the thrust of the verse is the same. The sons of Hezekiah will cease to sit on the throne of their father.

prophecy. In 598 BC, “Jehoiachin [who was born five generations after Hezekiah] and his family were taken away by Nebuchadnezzar with everything else of value from Jerusalem’s palace.”⁸ Perhaps even more powerful is the deeper truth Isaiah is speaking to—David’s line will come to an end among the descendants of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:21). The promise given to David in 2 Samuel 7 is that from his son would come an everlasting kingdom. Hezekiah had played a role in the covenant promise given to David serving as king over Judah, but the continuation of the Davidic line through his offspring would end.⁹

What was so bad about Hezekiah showing his visitors around? Why would God hand down such a stiff punishment for such a small offense? Isaiah provides the answer to these questions in his prophetic rebuke of Hezekiah in Isaiah 39:5-7. To fully appreciate the necessity of the judgment from the Lord pronounced by Isaiah, we must first lay the groundwork preceding this passage. Isaiah 30:15 shows the characteristics a godly king should possess. First, to back up one step further, Isaiah 30:1-17 is a rebuke of the children of God for making an alignment with Egypt in an attempt to provide security from their enemies instead of trusting God. Then, in verse 15, God speaks through the prophet Isaiah to instruct the people of Judah that their true salvation is not from Egypt and an allegiance with a former world power: “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength” (30:15). The people of God should have trusted in Yahweh for their salvation from foreign enemies not an alliance with Egypt. They should have trusted Yahweh for military strength instead of placing their trust in the chariots of Pharaoh. William Holladay writes, “God expects you to be saved by returning

⁸John Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 25 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 66.

⁹The Davidic connection is brought forth in the beginning of this pericope in Isa 38:5: “Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord the God of David your father.” The conception of a Davidic connection has been established in the mind of the reader at this point. Isaiah is further the significance of this connection in 39:7 when he speaks of Hezekiah’s line resulting in eunuchs. For additional comment on the cessation of the Davidic line, see Gary Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, The New American Commentary, vol. 15A (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 659; Edward Young, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 19-39*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 538.

to him, in quiet confidence and trust . . . but instead you insist on depending, of all things, on horses (no doubt part of the expected military aid from Egypt).”¹⁰

Once again, the children of God are placing their faith in a foreign alliance. This time it is under the kingship of Hezekiah instead of Ahaz, and the foreign super power of the day is no longer Egypt but Babylon. The outcome is the same—just as Ahaz had not placed his faith in Yahweh, so also Hezekiah is guilty of the same sin as he places his trust in Babylonians over and above God. Most recently, Hezekiah and his embrace of a Babylonian envoy have manifested the repeated rejection of God by his people. The rejection of God will produce a series of consequences that extend beyond Hezekiah’s day. Oswalt states, “How the house of David will have fallen in that day, victim of decade after decade of the continued refusal to trust in God because of being blinded by human glory.”¹¹

Faithfulness of God

The bleak outlook for Hezekiah and the people of God in Judah is intentional. The intentional structure of Isaiah sets up his readers to deal with the harsh reality of God’s judgment. As previously mentioned, Isaiah 38-39 are not in chronological order for they occur prior to the events of Isaiah 37.¹² Chapters 38-39 are “effectively a flashback to something that happened before the events that have just been described [in chapter 37].”¹³ There is an intentionality to Isaiah’s ordering. For Isaiah 37 ends with a

¹⁰William Holladay, *Isaiah: Scroll of a Prophetic Heritage* (New York: Pilgrim, 1978), 84.

¹¹Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, 697.

¹²Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 294, explains, “The events in these chapters [Isa. 38-39] pre-date those in chapters 36-37 by some years.” Evidence for the reordering can be found in Isa 38:5-6, for these two verses place the events of chaps. 38-39 prior to the fall of Senacharib in chap. 37.

¹³Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles Wings, The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 154.

military victory and temporary deliverance. Isaiah has positioned us to dwell not on the temporary victory but to focus attention upon the bigger picture. He wants us to consider the larger dilemma. Although the people of God may have won a battle against Sennacherib, metaphorically speaking they are losing the war. Eventually the people of God will be carried off to a foreign land to be under the governance of a foreign king instead of in the Promised Land under the rule of a Davidic descendant. Isaiah is using this shift in chronology as an opportunity to direct his readers to ask, how can we trust a God who goes back on his promises?¹⁴ If the perceived answer to this question is in the negative, we cannot trust God, then we are left with a very bleak outlook: If God is willing to abandon his promises then all hope is lost. You may have come to the same position as a Christian or as someone who has been involved with church for some time. You have come to understand a need for God's people to rely upon him for strength, but we place trust in some other source. For instance, in the midst of a particularly trying time when we desperately want comfort and peace, we find ourselves resting in the embrace of alcohol or overeating, instead of placing trust in God and finding rest and peace in him. After failing in a specific area repeatedly, the consequences of our actions become more apparent. The next logical experience is to question whether God still has plans for us. Have I failed him to such a degree that he is done with me?

God has not forgotten his people, and his expression of covenant renewal and a note of personal concern for the comfort of his people emphasizes this. Let us first take up the expression of covenant renewal. A cursory reading of the verse may not cause us to think God is solidifying a covenant or even using covenant language. Yet we need to focus on one specific phrase: "Comfort my people, says your God." This phrase is striking and to some degree shocking in light of the bleak message just handed down to

¹⁴John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 46, writes, "Chapters 40-48 particularly address the questions concerning God's ability and desire to deliver that the exile would pose."

Hezekiah in chapter 39 concerning the future of the nation. However, this phrase of comfort is the beginning of the answer to our question: Have I failed so much he is done with me? The affirmation of Israel being God's people and he being their God is a way of confirming God's commitment to his people. The phrasing of "my people, says your God" is relatively rare in Isaiah because the prophet Isaiah wants us to notice a sense of covenant renewal when we read this passage.¹⁵ Isaiah is making reference to Leviticus 26 where the Mosaic covenant is established through a series of blessings and curses. In both of these occasions, we see the use of "my people," and "your God."¹⁶ Isaiah is also not alone in seeing this type of language as covenant renewal language. Hosea uses this same language to express the idea that there is an eschatological expectation of covenant renewal for God's people.

In Hosea, Israel has been metaphorically given the name "Not My People." We can see the expression of future redemption and the renewal of covenant promises when Hosea writes, "I will say to Not My People, 'You are my people'; and he say, 'You are my God'" (Hos 2:23). Hosea sees the language of "my people" and "your God" as being specific to covenant renewal between God and Israel. Therefore, when we read this phrase in Isaiah 40:1 we see that God is not only offering comfort but he is doing so as one who is true to his covenant commitments. In other words, Isaiah 39 described the dismissal of the Davidic line from the throne and an apparent forfeiture of God's promise to Israel. Then, in a complete reversal, we hear a message of comfort from God. Oswalt explains, "Whatever the breaches of covenant 'this people' may have committed, and however grievous the punishments the nation will have suffered, the descendants of Abraham and Jacob need not fear that God will forget his promises to their ancestors."¹⁷

¹⁵The phrase "אלהיך" or "your God" only occurs in Isaiah here and 40:9; 35:4; 59:2.

¹⁶John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 12, writes, "Particularly significant may be the parallel with Lev. 26.12, given other links in vv. 1-2 with Lev. 26."

¹⁷Oswalt, *Isaiah 40-66*, 49.

By seeing the covenant overtones in Isaiah 40:1, we can find comfort ourselves, for despite the failings of God's people he does not abandon his promises to us. Even though the people of God experience consequences for their sin, God still upholds his promise to redeem us. Our hope for the future is based in the never-ending faithfulness of God.

The second answer to our question, Have I failed so much he is done with me?, centers upon the personal concern God has for the comfort of his people.¹⁸ The phrase "Comfort, comfort" is a command.¹⁹ Therefore, someone is to speak this word of comfort from God, but the speaker is not immediately identified. The emphasis is not initially upon who is speaking, but what is being spoken, drawing attention to the message of comfort.²⁰ Next, the ordering of events in Isaiah's prophecy has led us through the failure of God's people, in particular their attempt to provide their own protection from encroaching enemies as opposed to trusting God for their protection. It is in this low state that they can find comfort. In this section of five verses (Isa. 40:1-5) the emphasis is upon the hope Judah is to have. As already seen, God does command the message of comfort to be spoken, but he wants this message spoken with an intimate appeal. "Speak tenderly," or more literally, "speak to the heart," is an intimate invitation to God's care and concern for his children.²¹ The phrase "speak to the heart" is not only "expressing comfort and kindness but is seeking to persuade, inviting [Isaiah's audience] to respond to love."²²

¹⁸The speakers do not remain anonymous. Numerous groups are identified as those speaking the word of comfort. For instance, Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah*, 11, suggests the speakers of comfort are the "lookouts" in Isa 52:8. Identifying those charged with speaking comfort does not have much bearing upon the sermon at this juncture, it is helpful to note a more plausible source for the speakers of comfort. See Duane Garrett, *The Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, forthcoming).

¹⁹The words "דַּבְּרוּ נְדַבְּרוּ" are both verbs in the piel, imperative, masculine, plural form, denoting a command given to a group of people.

²⁰Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55*, 11.

²¹The phrase translated as "speak tenderly" gives the sense of the Hebrew phrase "דַּבְּרוּ עַל-לֵב," but the literal translation of "speak to the heart" is perhaps more effective.

²²Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 303.

The comfort being presented is more than simply an offer, it is an appeal for God's people to accept. The appeal God is making to his wayward people is one of peace: "Her warfare has ended" (Isa 40:2b). The failure to trust God instead of Egypt, the failure to abandon worldly sources of protection and power for true Divine protection, is pardoned, forgiven. God desires for his people to find comfort in him and pardon for their sins. We are being compelled to accept his redemption and be reconciled to him.

To be fully convinced and trust that God has likewise pardoned our failures, that we are no longer at enmity with God, we must see that God's provision was not only for exiled Jews. The message is not only for a group of people who initially heard Isaiah's prophecy; it is also for the future people of Zion to speak in the day of exile.²³ Garrett writes, "The initial command, 'Comfort my people,' is plural. YHWH commissions not one spokesperson but two: the prophet (40:6-8) and personified Zion (40:9-11)."²⁴ Thus, the speech is a message that supersedes the prophet Isaiah; it is a message of hope that will extend beyond the Israelite return from exile. The extension of this message is compounded by the way God speaks. The phrase "says your God" is in the imperfect tense, which implies on going action.²⁵ In other words, God keeps saying to his children a message of comfort. Therefore, the ongoing message of God's personal concern for his people, spoken to Jerusalem and the people of Zion, extends to us today. Therefore, it is appropriate for us to hear this message speaking to us.

²³Garrett, *The Problem of the Old Testament*, forthcoming.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵The ongoing action is of special note at this juncture. Jan Koole explains, "The use of the impf. is striking . . . one expects a perf. form. But our formula also has the imperf. form in 1:11, 18; 33:10; 40:25; 41:21; 66:9. This may perhaps be explained by its durative sense . . . the word of God remains valid as such." Jan Koole, *Isaiah III: Isaiah 40-48*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1 (Kampen, The Netherlands: Peeters, 1997) 49. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 303, points out that the imperfect tense for "says your God" is "almost peculiar to the Isaianic literature" and therefore of more of unique significance.

The faithfulness of God springs off the page in this opening verse of chapter 40, especially in light of the prophecy Hezekiah received from the Lord just a few sentences before. God is giving a message of comfort to his people. The message of comfort is successful because of the character of the one giving it. As the people of God, we must realize our failures do not mute the promises of God. God's promises do not remain true because he overlooks sin and bypasses judgment, instead, he has made a way to pardon sin and uphold his faithfulness. Pardon is the substance to the message of comfort from God.

Message of God

The message of comfort is not one of inactivity, in which we sit back and have a feeling of peace wash over us. To the contrary, the message of comfort solicits a response from all who have come to the realization that sin has consequences. The appropriate response is to don an orange reflective vest and join a road construction crew. The message of comfort from God through pardon implies that a response of repentance is the appropriate action by the hearers. You may look at this passage and conclude that there is no reference to repentance. To see the need for repentance we must first examine the requirements for God's highway as if his people were a road construction crew. "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isa. 40:3). The highway will take place by the lifting up of valleys, and leveling off of mountains and hills. Later ancient writers describe a similar process, only on a smaller scale, of preparing the route for an army as they marched through the land. Therefore, we are able to gather a picture in our minds of what Isaiah is envisioning. Anything that would hinder an army, with its horses and chariots and foot soldiers, should be removed so that they may travel unhindered. However, in Isaiah's description the goal is not to smooth out the road for ourselves, but for Yahweh to travel. He is to return to his people. Isaiah is picturing a time long after the days of Hezekiah when God has ceased to dwell in Jerusalem. Goldinday and Payne write, "The

wilderness is Yhwh's regular home when not choosing to dwell in Jerusalem."²⁶ As Yahweh leaves the wilderness and returns to the city in which his people dwell, the path shall be cleared. Metaphorically, the people should remove any impediments that would slow or prohibit the coming of the Lord. In the context of Isaiah's original hearers, they would have probably understood this to mean that God would be coming back to dwell among his people after the exile. Yet they would have also understood this metaphor to mean removal of obstacles within each person that drove God's presence from Jerusalem to begin with. We see evidence of this understanding in Isaiah 57:14-15:

And it shall be said, "Build up, build up, prepare the way, remove every obstruction from my people's way." For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who in habits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

Goldingay and Payne rephrase this verse more concisely: "The highway that clears the way for God's coming is a purified heart."²⁷

As mentioned, the message given to post-exilic Jerusalem also extends to us today. The means by which this message comes to us is through Jesus. Although these words were originally spoken by Isaiah to a Jewish audience, they "nevertheless point in their fullest sense to the appearance of the great forerunner of Christ."²⁸ Each of the four gospels quotes from Isaiah 40:3, but Luke's quote is the most extensive. He quotes Isaiah 40:3 first in Zachariah's prophecy about his infant son John the Baptist. He then provides a more lengthy quote of Isaiah 40:3-6 when he is describing the theological backing for

²⁶John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40-55*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 73. Goldingay and Payne continue, "The words 'clear Yhwh's way' recall the clearing of a route for an army. The practice is known explicitly from slightly later writers, but was perhaps already familiar in the sixth century, though the obstacles in mind later are less formidable ones than those indicated by v. 4." *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 291.

²⁸Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 136.

John the Baptist's ministry and preaching in Luke 3:4-6 (Matt 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; John 1:23). John the Baptist has come "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). Luke instructs his readers that the message John is proclaiming is fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3-5. In particular, Luke is focusing on John's message of repentance more so than his message of forgiveness or baptism.²⁹ Luke clearly sees John's message of repentance being reflected in Isaiah's call for a highway to be made straight and flat so that God's way may be prepared. The road construction is to take place within the people who would receive Jesus. John's hearers are to remove all impediments to the Redeemer's coming. To remove impediments is to repent of sins, and thus "see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:6).³⁰ Bock explains that the "heart that turns in repentance is to express itself in concrete acts and await God's deliverance."³¹ The message John was preaching in the wilderness was the same message Isaiah was prophesying several hundred years before. The right response to an experience of God's judgment is to remove those obstacles that hindered you from coming close to God, which is the nature of repentance. Through repentance redemption is possible through Jesus.

Conclusion

Hezekiah's failure to place his trust in the Lord after clearly seeing God's power manifested in his life is not a failure unique to him. Our failure to trust in God for power and protection can manifest itself in numerous ways, including through the sin of omission. We may have found ourselves in a position very similar to Hezekiah and after having a prayer answered and healing granted we give the credit to the medicine we took

²⁹Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 287.

³⁰Luke 3:6 is essentially a paraphrase of Isa 40:5. Bock describes the exchanging of "salvation of God" in Luke 3:6 from "glory of the Lord" in Isa 40:5 as "contextual equivalent." His reasoning is grounded by the "fact, if one reads on in the MT, once can that Isaiah's topic in this section is salvation (Isa. 40:10-11)." Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 291.

³¹*Ibid.*, 293.

or the work by a surgeon. Our situation may involve a different set of circumstances but the result is the same, we experienced God's provision in our lives and failed to acknowledge it when the occasion presented itself. Our failure may be much more explicit; it is not that we omitted anything, instead we have blatantly placed our trust in the creation instead of the Creator. Punishment is the necessary response to sin by a righteous God. Isaiah predicts the demise of Hezekiah's lineage due to their failure to place their trust in God. We must also realize that the Bible likewise predicts our demise. We, too, do not have any prospects of continuing on in God's favor, we are destined for judgment.

Upon realizing our state of despair, we can find comfort in the fact that God does not leave us to flounder in hopeless despair. He has made a way for us to receive a pardon from our sins. The sacrificial offering of Jesus absorbs the iniquity we are guilty of and sets us free. To hear that you can be free from judgment is not a prescription for inactivity, but solicits a response of repentance and contrition before a gracious God.

CHAPTER 6

SERMON 5: GOD'S SELF OBLIGATION

Categorical failure turned ragging success are the components of a compelling story. Stories of failure are all too common, and yet, every now and then we hear of someone who has risen out of the ash heap of failure to make an incredible comeback. Thomas Edison famously failed 1,000 times before successfully creating an incandescent light bulb. Abraham Lincoln lost eight elections before becoming the sixteenth president. More recently, Michael Jordan did not make the cut for his high school basketball team before going on to be the greatest NBA player of all time. Also, Steve Jobs was forced out of the company he cofounded, only to come back as CEO and lead Apple to become one of the world's wealthiest companies at the time of his death.

We love these stories of redemption. One of the elements that makes each of these stories particularly attractive is the way in which utter failure was not the conclusion. Israel, as the people of God, is described in Isaiah 43 as facing utter failure as well. However, Isaiah shows that utter failure is not the end for God's people. The story of redemption comes spilling forth from the failure, the judgment, but redemption is not what the people expected. Our story of redemption takes the same twist—we may feel as if redemption comes when we earn it, when we claw our way back to victory. The following passage from Isaiah shows that we cannot earn our victory, it must be provided, but the victory provided is best for us. Another way to say this is that God is not obligated by us he obligates himself to us.

“Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel! You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings, or honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, or wearied you with frankincense. You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for

my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. Put me in remembrance; let us argue together; set forth your case, that you may be proved right. Your first father sinned, and your mediators transgressed against me. Therefore I will profane the princes of the sanctuary, and deliver Jacob to utter destruction and Israel to reviling. “But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. This one will say, ‘I am the LORD’s,’ another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, ‘The LORD’s,’ and name himself by the name of Israel.” (Isa 43:22-44:5)

God Is Not Obligated

The people of Israel feel that God should be obligated to deliver them and provide blessing on their behalf. This is perhaps most evident by their cries of frustration over God’s lack of provision, or at least perceived lack of provision. “My right is disregarded by my God” (Isa 40:27b). From the vantage point of the people, God is not keeping up his end of the bargain. They are performing the rituals of the Jewish faith, sacrifices and the like, but God is withholding what is rightfully theirs: his blessing and favor. After hearing these accusations, God provides a three-fold rebuttal: he responds to their accusations, challenges them to make their case, and shows the people what they have earned through their religious practices.

God Responds to Israel’s Accusations

In Isaiah 43:22-24, God begins his refutation of these accusations brought forward by his people in Isaiah 40:27. These four verses describe unfruitful religious activity. The passage does not describe a lack of religious activity; instead, they were being done in vain. The passage almost reads as if no sacrifices were being conducted, with phrases like, “You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings” (Isa 43:23).¹

¹In this section is a distinct difference of exegetical interpretation and subsequently theological interpretation. Isa 43:22-24 references the lack of sacrifices being conducted, but the question is whether the sacrifices were not taking place at all or were they simply not taking place in a satisfactory manner. The first group to consider are those who believe the sacrifices did not take place. This group believed that the sacrifices should have been taking place, but the Israelites failed to fulfill their sacrificial duties. See Walter Brugemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, The Westminster Bible Commentary (Louisville: Westminster John Knox,

But there was no known pre-exilic period of Israelite history in which the sacrifices ceased to exist.² Therefore, the passage is saying that these sacrifices were so meaningless it is as if they did not even exist. For the readers of Isaiah, the idea of God receiving meaningless sacrifices is nothing new. The issue of God's weariness over meaningless sacrifices was first addressed in the introduction to the whole book. Isaiah 1:13 states, "Bring no more vain offerings" and then in the next verse, "Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them." Isaiah 43 is playing on this very same theme, but in a more ironic way. The sacrifices had not ceased but the prophet is writing as if they might as well have ceased. The problem was not the offering of sacrifices, but the significance of the sacrifices they were offering. Israel had adopted a system of "ritual divorced from moral and spiritual commitment."³ Their sacrificial efforts were conducted, but to no avail. The people of Israel had been offering sacrifices and had grown weary of offering sacrifices with no divine payment in return.

1998), 61. A second group views the lack of sacrifices as attributal to a later author for Second Isaiah. Second Isaiah is written during the time of exile and therefore the people are unable to make the sacrifices God desires. Goldingay writes, "By bringing about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and taking many of the people into exile (including the priesthood) Yhwh had terminated the requirement or even the possibility of offerings and sacrifices. Verse 23b thus shows that v. 23a is not a direct criticism." John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 219. See also F. Delitzsch, *Isaiah, Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 7, trans. James Martin (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 430. Some view the passage as referring to sacrifices as being conducted, but with the wrong heart rendering them ineffective. See John Oswalt, *Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), and Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 343-44. This last approach is the most likely because of the allusion in 43:22-24 to 1:10-20. The inclusion of "weary" in 43:22-24 is an allusion to 1:10-20, which is made more evident by the parallels in both passages. Although each of these positions end with the same conclusion from v. 24, namely the people of God wanted him to serve them. The means by which this is accomplished is drastically different. Is the passage warning against lack of worship (option 1, supported by Brugemann) or speaking of a group of people who have been prevented from worship by the exile (option 2). In the most plausible solution, the third option, the people are attempting to use empty religious practice to obligate God. The theological interpretation and sermonic application also differs significantly based upon the option chosen. This chap. adheres to the third option.

²Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 342.

³Ibid.

The weariness of the people is somewhat understandable. Isaiah 44:24 describes the sacrifices as being fatty. Oswalt writes, “The people most assuredly had drenched the altars of God with the fat, the most desirable part, of their sacrifices.”⁴ The people were working hard to provide worthy sacrifices. Motyer explains, “They thought that by the technique of sacrifice God could be made to do their bidding.”⁵ The frustration of the people is even more understandable when we recognize the mindset of those influencing the nation of Israel. The people of Israel had looked to the religions that surrounded them and tried to imitate the meritorious systems present in these false religions. Oswalt continues, “The very purpose of ritual in the history of religion has been to appease the gods and satisfy any claims they may have on us so that we may use the power of the gods to pursue our own goals.”⁶ While these surrounding nations continued their influence in the lives of the Israelites, one of the areas affected was worship. They did not entirely adopt a new religion or god, but they worshiped Yahweh with an empty form of cultic ritual. Israel did not want a relationship with Yahweh, they wanted a god who would grant them blessing when they summoned him. They did not realize that “true and acceptable worship . . . dare not sink into self-service, manipulation, or an attempt to earn God’s favor.”⁷

Weariness can also feel like frustration, and frustration with God is one of the key symptoms of a warped form of worship. At the outset, we may not have begun to serve God out of a desire to have him owe us, but when things go wrong in our lives, the nature of our worship is exposed. A friend of mine encapsulated these very symptoms during a specific trial in her life. Her adult daughter had gotten pregnant outside of

⁴Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 160.

⁵Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 344.

⁶Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 160.

⁷Gary Smith, *Isaiah 40-66*, The New American Commentary, vol. 15B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 215.

wedlock. She was disappointed in her daughter, but also disappointed in God. At one particularly low moment she expressed her frustration by exclaiming, if God would let this happen to me what was the point in going to church all those years, always having our children involved in ministry, and raising them up in the way they should go. She did not set out attending church or having her children involved in the ministries of the church as a means of obligating God, but that is what her worship evolved into.

When worship turns into a ritual to obligate God or to put him in our debt, then we are not the only ones left feeling weary. The passage in Isaiah 43 flips the table on weariness. The people of Israel describe their experience of worship without results as wearying, but the real weariness belongs to God. He is being worshipped by empty manipulative sacrifices. Oswalt writes, “Their attempts to use cultic ritual to manipulate God were only one more manifestation of their deeply ingrained inability to surrender themselves, their needs, and their destinies to him.”⁸ The frustration was foremost God’s. He had provided the sacrifices as the single greatest expression of the people’s humble and contrite hearts expressing their need for God’s provision and forgiveness. His people took these sacred symbols and developed them into a form of self-serving manipulation.

God Dares the People to Argue

Why would God possibly put up with a people who weary him so? In Isaiah 43:25-28, God hints at why he would ever bless the people (his own sake). The reason this is called a hint is that the next section in chapter 44 lays out God’s case more fully. At the same time, this hint is not subtle, as can be discerned from the opening words in verse 25. “I, I am he” uses repetition to provide emphasis and to unmistakably declare the character of God.⁹ His character is one of grace, and not because of empty sacrifices, but because he is serving himself.

⁸Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 160.

⁹In the Hebrew, the word repeated is “אֲנִי־אֲנִי,” to emphatically state the character of God. See

Despite this hint, the prophet quickly returns to the issue of faulty sacrifices. He provides an opportunity for them to settle accounts based upon their own merits. If Israelites feel God is obligated and he now owes them, then they can provide some evidence to bolster their claim. In other words, as Oswalt explains, “If this offer of grace is too humiliating, if the Israelites do not want a forgetful God, he is willing to be reminded of anything in their favor that they think he may have forgotten.”¹⁰ Please, go ahead and “put me in remembrance.” The phrase “put me in remembrance” resembles an argument between an embittered husband and wife. The wife says, why do you act like I owe you? The husband responds by listing out all the things he has “selflessly” done for his wife. God is challenging, daring, Israel to come up with ways in which God owes them: “Give me your list.”

Before Israel can even begin to argue its case, God interjects a piece of evidence that will undue any argument they can come up with. He says, “Your first father sinned.” The phrase “first father” is “difficult to determine” but in the context of the passage, most assuredly is a reference to Jacob, for he is mentioned in each of the next three verses.¹¹ Needless to say, Jacob was not known for his piety.¹² Bruegemann writes, “Israel is marked by recalcitrance, disobedience, and unfaith from the outset.”¹³ Then the reference to the mediators, which is also vague, conveys a similar message of Israel’s longstanding disobedience. Oswalt states, “Indeed, if Israel chooses the route of self-justification, all is lost. Not only is the present generation sinful, and the one before that, but every one right

also Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 344.

¹⁰Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 161.

¹¹Ed Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972), 3:164.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Brugemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 63.

back to the founder of the nation.”¹⁴ Regardless of how prominent the biblical figures may be, they have still fallen short of God’s standard. Before God’s children attempt to make a claim that God owes them, they should take note of their ancestry. No one has ever lived a life free of sin, apart from Jesus, and just like the people of Israel, we have no standing before a holy God.

God Gives as He Is Obligated

The overarching thought of 43:22-28 is that the Israelites have forfeited any claims that would obligate God. When they removed the true spirit of the sacrificial system to come before God with a worshipful contrite heart, they also removed their favor with God. Then he reinforces this idea by providing the only reason they received any favor in the past: it was by God’s grace, not their meritorious service. The only thing they earned was utter destruction. Therefore, God promises “utter destruction” and “reviling.” Oswalt explains that utter destruction “refers to the total destruction of a nation that has sunk so far in sin that there is no further justification for its existence.”¹⁵ The destruction of this magnitude has previously been reserved for the enemies of Israel: the Amalekites and the Canaanites.¹⁶ However, now the people of God will experience all that their faulty sacrifices earned them. They were growing weary of performing sacrifices and not receiving anything in return. The irony of the passage is that God was the one actually being wearied, and it was only by his grace that he was withholding what the people deserved. But now they would receive what their sacrifices had earned them, utter destruction.

¹⁴Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 161.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

God Obligates Himself

God comforts the nation of Israel by reassuring them they are his chosen children, and he has obligated himself to his people. The passage beginning in Isaiah 44:1 starts off with a distinct contrast of “but now.” The contrast first highlights that you cannot obligate God, and in fact, just the opposite will take place. Jacob’s “utter destruction and Israel to reviling” is promised (43:28), “but now” the tables have turned for Jacob and Israel. God is reminding his people that he has obligated himself. Goldingay writes, “Punishment is not the end because the relationship was always based on Yhwh’s election rather than on the people’s deserts.”¹⁷ God wants his people to understand clearly that *he* has committed *himself* to Israel and they are *his* chosen people. For God to choose to keep his promises despite Israel’s inability to fulfill their covenant responsibilities, even from the time of their forefathers, is an act of grace. Oswalt explains,

Once again . . . the completely unmerited nature of God’s salvation is underlined. God has reminded the people that their sin has removed him from any obligation whatsoever to them; they cannot demand that he deliver. But that does not mean that God will not deliver; it means only that what he does is a free gift growing out of his own love.¹⁸

God’s act of gracious faithfulness does not take place in a vacuum. His faithfulness on display in this passage is born out of his covenant commitment made to his people. The covenant nature of 44:1 is made apparent by the four verses that follow. These four verses do not simply contain a series of blessings that will happen to the people of Israel. Instead, the blessings mentioned in this series of verses have very specific meanings corresponding exactly to the promises made as part of the Abrahamic covenant. Webb suggests that contained in these verses is “exactly what was promised to Abraham: a great name, many descendants, blessing overflowing to all the families of the earth.”¹⁹

¹⁷Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55*, 228.

¹⁸Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 163.

¹⁹Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 180.

It is helpful to identify the covenant nature of God's self-obligation because then we are able to see that God is not a capricious god—He has not recently decided to favor the nation of Israel. God had chosen Israel long before the failures that led to the nation's destruction and reviling. Therefore, we are not left to fear God's mood, or whether or not he will act in the favor of his children today. God reminds the people of Israel of his covenant faithfulness. God's eternal faithfulness, because of his self-obligation, is exemplified in the following four verses as fearlessness, out pouring of the Spirit, and being called by the name Israel.

Fear Not

God's self-obligation makes us fearless. On the contrary, to rely upon one's self leads to fear and anxiety. If I am dependent upon my own ability to be in right standing before God, then I end up where Martin Luther found himself. Luther, the great reformer, was not always the man known for being liberated by God's grace. Prior to his revelation of God's grace by justification through faith, he lived a life of works righteousness hoping to do enough for God to be obligated to provide him salvation. The impression Luther had was that "salvation came by fanning the spark of goodness that was left even in the most reprobate."²⁰ James Kittelson explains the logic simply: "If people just did their best, God would be gracious. But they had to do their best."²¹ However, the problem with Luther's concerns over salvation were not alleviated; instead, these concerns began to warp his relationship with Jesus. Luther later reflected upon this time in his life said, "I lost hold of Christ the Savior and comforter and made of him a stock master and hangman of my poor soul."²² Luther lived in a state of perpetual fear as

²⁰James Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1986), 78.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*, 79.

he began to realize he could never do enough. He lived in a state of being terrified of running afoul and incurring God's wrath.

God's plans are not to extinguish his people but to revive them. Isaiah makes this plan of reviving rather explicit in a more obscure way. Isaiah makes a rather obscure reference, but once we see it clearly, Isaiah's point is explicitly made. The obscure reference in Isaiah 44:2 is to Jeshurun, which is a rare topic in the canon of Scripture, thus we should take note of the name and see exactly what is being referenced here.²³ Herbert Wolf writes that the name Jeshurun "is elsewhere applied to Israel only in Deuteronomy 32:15 and 33:5 and 26."²⁴ However, Isaiah has only one of these occurrences in mind, Deuteronomy 32, which is made obvious by his frequent referencing of the passage. Deuteronomy 32 records a song by Moses, and as Duane Garrett writes, "In Moses' Song, Jeshurun abused his prosperity and gorged himself, provoking God's wrath."²⁵ The provocation by Jeshurun leads to the central theme of Moses' Song. Garrett continues, "The essential message of the Song of Moses is this: Israel will fail to keep the Sinai Covenant, will suffer at the hands of the Gentiles and go into exile, but will be saved in an eschatological act of God."²⁶ Isaiah is beginning to see the events of Deuteronomy 32 play out during his lifetime and in the near future, so it is only logical that he would anticipate "the eschatological work of YHWH would follow."²⁷ Garrett suggests that the

²³Jeshurun is referenced only here in Isa 44:2 and Deut 32:15; 33:5, 26.

²⁴Herbert Wolf, *Interpreting Isaiah: The Suffering and Glory of the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985) 197.

²⁵Duane Garrett, *The Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, forthcoming), 6.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 9.

²⁷*Ibid.*

eschatological fulfillment in Isaiah 44:2-3 is “downcast Jeshurun will experience a revival of prosperity when YHWH sends rain to the land.”²⁸

Therefore, the irony of the name Jeshurun is revealed. The name Jeshurun means “upright,” which is “what the Lord desired his people to be.”²⁹ However, Jeshurun was anything but upright in Deuteronomy 32. In Isaiah 44, Jeshurun is placed parallel to Jacob/Israel, who has also failed to be upright, but ironically in this passage the people who have failed to be upright are the very ones God makes prosperous. So we fear not, because we do not serve a God who bases his actions upon human effort but on his own plans, which include blessing those who have come up short. Isaiah is seeing the eschatological future; he is seeing a time when Jesus has covered a multitude of sins. Moreover, we trust in his ability to perfectly keep the law, not our own ability to keep the law. We have the ultimate reason to fear not—Jesus’ work on the cross—which is confirmed by the giving of the Spirit.

Pouring Out His Spirit

God’s self-obligation is made permanent by the pouring out of the Spirit. Isaiah regularly uses poetic or symbolic imagery, and this time he is employing it to describe God’s reversal of fortunes for the people of Israel. In this instance, the imagery is of dry ground being replenished by flowing water. The abundance of water described in verse 3 leads to an abundance of flourishing vegetation—and in this case the vegetation is representative of humanity.³⁰ John Goldingay and David Payne write, “Dryness is a

²⁸Garrett, *The Problem of the Old Testament*, 7

²⁹Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 346.

³⁰John Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 25 (Dallas: Word, 2005), suggests the fertility is both in human terms and in agricultural terms. Watts’ view should be dismissed on two accounts, first, similar imagery is used in Isa 40-43 and is in reference specifically to human flourishing, and second, we find similar imagery of dryness being reversed by God and relating to human flourishing in other prophets (Ezek 37).

picture of the people’s current state and watering of the land is a symbol for renewing of the people.”³¹ Isaiah’s vision of dry ground being replenished by streams of water leads to the descendants of Israel increasing in number. The yield of new descendants is compared to willows sprouting up along a riverbank. Willow trees, along with Tamarisk and Poplar trees, are the most common along Middle Eastern river banks.³² The imagery used here is not unlike Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones springing to life across a barren valley.³³ We must be careful because an increase in the number of descendants is not the blessing being given here; it is the fruit of the blessing. Our most fundamental need is not fertility, but salvation.

The pouring out of God’s Spirit is crucial to the way in which God has obligated himself. He is describing a permanent fix to the failure of the children of Israel. If the passage did not include the work of the Spirit, then the only accomplishment would be an increase in the fertility of the people of Israel. Without divine intervention by the Holy Spirit “the same spiritual deficiency that precipitated the destruction of the nation once will do so again.”³⁴ Multiplication does not provide salvation; it would simply push a greater number of people into the destruction and reviling already being experienced by Israel. Instead, as Oswalt explains, “When God pours out his Spirit on his people, there will be a spiritual restoration that will deal with the problem that brought about the exile in the first place.”³⁵ The people of God do not need blessing—they need salvation.

³¹Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40-55*, 323.

³²*Ibid.*, 325. The word “עֲרֵבָה” is also translated by some English translations as Poplar trees (see: NAS, NIV, and HCSB), but regardless of the species of tree being referenced the effect is the same. A very prevalent tree along the banks of Middle Eastern rivers represents flourishing of the people of God.

³³Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 167.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*

Called by the Name of Israel

God's self-obligation is manifested most explicitly in the covenants. God's covenant faithfulness finds one of its clearest expressions of fulfillment in the keeping of the promise made to Abraham to make her name great (Gen. 12:2). What Isaiah has in view is a day when the name of Israel will be great even among Gentiles.³⁶ People outside of national Israel will desire to be called by the name of Jacob. The people of Israel were given the name by birth, but for those who have adopted the name Israel it is "an honorary name which one receives alongside one's original name, and this does not apply to a born Israelite."³⁷ Because even when "condemning the Israelites for their sinfulness, [Isaiah] still called them 'Jacob' and 'Israel.'"³⁸ Therefore, the people being

³⁶The reference to the one who would "name himself by the name of Israel" could be naming either Gentiles who want to be called by the name Israel or Jews who are embracing their heritage. The argument, made by Staalduine-Sulman and others, for Israelites being in the purview of Isaiah's prophecy is based upon "the direct context does not speak of gentiles, is the main argument. Positively stated, the direct context speaks of descendants of Israel." E. van Staalduine-Sulman, "Isaiah 44:5: Textual Criticism and Other Arguments," *Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism* 16 (2011): 3. In this case, those who are Israelites by name become true Israelites. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 347, explains, "The people of God, through the Spirit of God, becoming all they should be." The reason the Israelites needed this reaffirmation was due to their secularized and disaffected experience as exiles. See Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, 145. As Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55*, 233, writes, the argument is furthered by the idea that the exiled Israelites "would be unlikely to be reassured by a promise that people from other ethnic groups would join it." The argument for Gentiles being those who seek to be called by the name Israel is presented by D. W. Van Winkle, "Proselytes in Isaiah XL-LV? A Study of Isaiah XLIV 1-5," *Vetus Testamentum* 47 (1997): 343: "The reasons that the majority of scholars conclude that Isa. xlv 5 refers to the conversion of individual Gentiles. First, an Israelite, in turning from the way of sin to the way of the Lord, does not say that now he can begin to call himself 'Jacob' and 'Israel.' Even in condemning the Israelites for their sinfulness, Deutero-Isaiah still called them 'Jacob' and 'Israel' (xl 27, xliii 22-8, xlix 14). Second, elsewhere Deutero-Isaiah points out that even in their worst apostasy Yahweh never rejected his people as his own. They were still 'the Lord's' (xli 8-10, xlix 14-16, liv 1-8, lv 1-5). Third, it would be more normal for a newly converted Gentile, upon his full acceptance within the Israelite community, to exclaim that he is now 'the Lord's' and is named after Jacob and Israel." As a rebuttal of those who say this section is only speaking of Israel Jan L. Koole, *Isaiah III: Isaiah 40-48*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 1 trans. Anthony Runia (Walpole, MA: Peeters, 1997), 366, suggests, "In the broader context of 43:22-44:5 the creed of the former heathens and their accession to Israel from the counterpart of the taunts of 43:28. 42:1-9 already talked about salvation for the world." This sermon adheres to the latter of the two positions, because this position is understood as best representing the biblical data. However, the position by Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 168, is also accepted in the parameters of this sermon: "The promise is probably not limited to either Jews or Gentiles, but includes both."

³⁷Koole, *Isaiah 40-48*, 366.

³⁸Van Winkle, "Proselytes in Isaiah XL-LV?," 343.

referenced in verse 5 are non-Jews, Gentiles, us. Their ethnicity no longer sets them apart, but now is an individual commitment.

The individual commitment being made by these new converts to the faith is emphasized by the use of pronouns in the fifth verse. “One . . . another . . . another.” The words translated from the original language as “one” and “another” are the same word. Therefore, it is somewhat more literal to understand the verse as “one . . . and one . . . and one.”³⁹ The literal understanding of these phrases reinforces the individual response prescribed for all those who would seek to be called a member of God’s people. The pouring out of the Spirit does not provide universal salvation; instead, there must be an individual commitment. The individual commitment involves pledging faithfulness to God in a manner reminiscent of Romans 10:9: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.” Isaiah implies a similar confession in this passage. In the middle of verse 5, one of the new converts writes “the Lord’s” on his hand. Smith writes, “It is now that some slaves had the name of their master on their skin.”⁴⁰ The people in Isaiah’s prophecy choose slavery for themselves, because Yahweh as master improves their position. Passages like this are quite possibly the inspiration for Paul and his self-proclaimed title of “slave” or “bondservant” as means of describing his relationship to Christ.

Conclusion

The people of God have been given a name that is desired by all who wish to be found in right standing before God. However, this was only made possible because of the unleashing of the Holy Spirit to do the work of God. It was not by some work we can do or have done. Even religious activity does not qualify as a means or reason for God to

³⁹Use of “אֶחָד” in Isa 44:5 begins the verse as a masculine singular adjective, and then the other instances of the “אֶחָד” occurring in the verse (translated as “another”) are also in the masculine singular form. The only difference is the conjunctive vav that is added as a prefix in both cases. Moyter, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 347, suggests that it is helpful to “note also the same usage of [אֶחָד] in the contextually identical Psalm 87:4-6.” For in this passage the usages of אֶחָד are also in reference to individual people.

⁴⁰Smith, *Isaiah 40-66*, 221.

pardon people or overlook sin. In the end, God's choice provides the impetus for the victory he provides. God has chosen to obligate himself to bring redemption to his people, despite their immense failure. His people hoped to manipulate their religious practices to obligate God. They thought cultic worship would be a means of putting God in their debt and then he could be counted on to serve them. Though when this practice of worship for the sake of obligation rendered itself ineffective, the people grew weary. However, this was to their advantage because no amount of service would have ever been sufficient to earn God's favor. For God to step in and obligate himself simply because of his choice of his people is freeing. When we are able to accept God's gracious act of salvation on our behalf, then we can experience true fearlessness. God has graciously provided our story of incredible failure to amazing victory.

CHAPTER 7

SERMON 6: BUY WITHOUT PRICE

It was Monday night football and my wife was about to push me off the couch because she was so into the game. Really, it all began a few days prior to Monday night. We had recently watched the movie *The Blind Side*, which highlighted the life of Michael Oher. A family in Memphis, Tennessee, adopted him and while living with them he began a football career that culminated in a position in the NFL. The movie is an impassioned drama centering on the relationship between Oher and his mother. The compelling story captivated my wife in a way that sports movies are usually incapable of doing. Therefore, by the time the Monday Night Football game rolled around, all I had to do was mention that Oher was playing and my wife became the biggest Baltimore Ravens fan in our house. My wife was able to overlook all the things she usually finds disconcerting about football, the scantily clad cheerleaders, hard to follow rules, and over paid athletes, because of the connection she felt to the man in the middle of all the chaos. In the same way, for the person who does not attend church, the local congregation can have a lot of chaos to overlook. The remedy for this chaos is to share the compelling story of the gospel so that people might become connected to Jesus. The prophet Isaiah provides an excellent example of how to share the compelling message of Christ. Isaiah 55 may be a Jewish sermon, preached by a Jewish man, to Jewish people, but it is one of the clearest examples of a Christ-centered gospel appeal in Scripture.

Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know

you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ”For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. “For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

Isaiah is addressing a Jewish audience, and yet he is urging his audience to place their faith in Jesus. He crafted his message in such a way that he is also addressing a non-Jewish audience in 2016. In order to see the connection Isaiah is making and to show the significance of this connection for our lives, we must begin with Isaiah’s sermon and then turn our attention to Jesus. The message has three progressive steps, first, we will investigate the material leading up to Isaiah 55, then we will see the appeal the prophet Isaiah is making in this passage, and finally, we will listen as Jesus applies Isaiah 55 to our lives.

Lead Up to Isaiah 55

A distinct flow from Isaiah 52 to 55 must be in place before we can rightly see the appeal the prophet is making in chapter 55. The message from these four chapters is one of hope. It is a hope brought about by redemption born out of judgment. The key term for Isaiah 52-53 is Servant. Servant is a key word or code word for the one who is to come and set everything right again. “The Servant of the Lord [is] the key figure in God’s plan for his people and for the world (52:13-53:12).”¹ Therefore, the Servant of the Lord is Jesus. These two chapters describe the redemption provided by Jesus as the Servant of

¹Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 204.

the Lord. The redemption provided by the Servant is made possible because of his substitutionary action. The core of the Servant's substitutionary action is described in Isaiah 53:4-6:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray we have turned - every one- to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

In this passage, Isaiah is conveying the notion that the Servant will stand in the place of God's disobedient children. God will place the iniquity the people deserve upon his Servant. He does not suffer alongside God's people, but he takes the suffering they deserve.² Perhaps it is easier to explain the Servants substitution by way of analogy. Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach write,

If a child strays too close to a bonfire despite being warned of the danger, and his mother leaps forward to rescue him from danger and is burned herself, she suffers "because of" his disobedience. Yet her suffering would be substitutionary—she suffers in his place, and the disobedient child is thereby spared.³

There is hope of future redemption because the wrath of God has been fully absorbed by the Servant of the Lord. However, it is not enough for sins to be atoned for, we must also be in right standing before God. Isaiah 53:11 speaks to this very point: "Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities." Because the Servant is the righteous one, he can "make many to be accounted righteous."⁴

Isaiah 54-55 is a two-part section, the first section in chapter 54 applies the work of the Servant to the people of God. John Oswalt explains, "In the first part (ch. 54),

²John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), 77.

³Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions; Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 55.

⁴Mark Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 31.

he rehearsed the effects of the work as Israel's estrangement from her husband is healed and as her spiritual poverty and despair are replaced by the glorious city of righteousness."⁵ Therefore, the function of Isaiah 54 is to describe the effect of the work of Servant upon the people of God. Isaiah 55 takes the work from description to prescription, "calling Israel to receive what is now hers to have."⁶

Invitation to Come Drink

The thrust of Isaiah 55 is for the people of Israel to take advantage of the redemption made possible by the Servant. Isaiah is not suggesting or asking the people to take advantage of the Servant's work, he is being more forceful than that. In the first seven verses of chapter 55 are 12 imperatives, or commands, giving the passage a forceful character. Isaiah is pushing the people to take advantage of the Servant's work.

There is a two-part appeal being made by the prophet, first, he urgently appeals to all people to accept the redemption provided by the Servant. Then, secondly, Isaiah underlines the benefit, or the rich food, the Servant's work has accomplished.

Isaiah's urgent appeal is made possible by the work of the Servant. He begins his appeal with a compelling offer in a manner reminiscent of an ancient middle eastern water salesmen calling out in the market: come get your water.⁷ We might think of someone selling cell phones at a mall kiosk, "Come check out the newest phones!" Isaiah is provoking his hearers to think of a marketplace atmosphere where products are sold, not given away. Due to the Servant's work, the blessings of God are being made available in the market place for those with no money. Isaiah uses an oxymoron of sorts in describing

⁵John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 433.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Isaiah 55:1 literally reads, "Ho/Ha come, everyone who thirsts." John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 435, writes that this type of cry "and its repetition, reflect the sales pitch of oriental water sellers."

the transactions for the blessing being offered: “Come, buy wine and milk without money” (Isa 55:2).

Several years ago, I walked into a coffee shop and began ordering my usual half-caffeine latte. I paused in the middle of my order to decide between the medium or large, after a moment I went with a medium for economic reasons. Upon placing my order, the cashier informed me that my latte was free. Obviously, I was delighted but I also inquired as to why I was not expected to pay. She pointed to a group of people sitting at a near-by table. She said, “They are from a local church and have paid for the next \$500 worth of orders. I was taken back by their generosity, and secretly wished I had opted for the large. My latte was purchased that night, but someone else paid the price. In the case of the Servant’s offering, there is a cost associated with the blessing being offered. God has not removed the cost of his blessing, to the contrary, it was very costly, but another paid the cost. The blessing being offered came through judgment, not apart from it.

The benefit, or the rich food, provided by Servant is directly related to his own wrath absorbing work. Isaiah has been stressing the idea that the work of the Servant has now absorbed the judgment of God, and for all those who trust the Servant the consequences of judgment have been reversed. The prophet clarifies the idea of reversal by making reference to his own calling into prophetic ministry and the charge he was given at that time. His calling is recorded in Isaiah 6, and after he has been called out by God he is given his first assignment:

Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.” Make the heart of this people dull and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts. (Isa 6:9-10)

Then God tells Isaiah that he is to make them blind and deaf with his message “until the cities lie waste without inhabitant” (Isa 6:11). Isaiah’s initial assignment was to warn the people of God’s coming judgment only to have them never be affected by his warning and to walk straight into judgment all the same.

Now in Isaiah 55 a reversal of judgment and its costly effects is being offered. The prophet wants us to make a connection between Isaiah 6 and 55. We are first able to notice the connection by similarities in content. A more specific connection and profound connection can also be made even though it might not be obvious at first glance. In chapter 6, Isaiah is told to tell the people to “keep on hearing.” The most literal translation of the phrase is “listen, listen.” The phrase “listen, listen” is only repeated one other time in the book of Isaiah, and that is in chapter 55.⁸ In this later instance, it is translated as “listen diligently.”⁹ In both cases, the English translation is helpful for understanding the sense of the phrase, but by seeing it in the original language we are able to see the explicit connection Isaiah is making. In chapter 6, he speaks of the inability to hear and the subsequent destruction because the people turning from God because of their deafness. In chapter 55, he tells the people to listen, incline their ears, and hear so that they might be given life. Isaiah is pleading with the people of Israel to take advantage of the opportunity to hear, now made available by the work of the Servant.

Those who do listen to the Servant will not only have judgment reversed but they will also receive a new covenant, an eternal covenant. The covenant will be in the same vein as the covenant with David, thus it will be a one-sided covenant. The covenant with Israel handed down through Moses has “been broken and thus in a real sense, abrogated.”¹⁰ However, God is now going to make a new covenant with his people. This new covenant will be in the order of the covenant with David. The nature of the covenant with David is an eternal commitment. Brevard Childs writes that Psalm 89 speaks to the nature of the covenant with David: “The psalmist speaks of ‘a covenant with my chosen

⁸See Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55*, 546.

⁹The phrase “שמעו שמעו” occurs here just as does in Isa 6:9. In both cases the phrase begins with a word in the *qal*, imperative, masculine, plural followed by a repetition of the word in the *qal*, infinitive, absolute.

¹⁰Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 438.

one,’ ‘sworn to David my servant,’ ‘to establish your descendants forever.’”¹¹ The assuredness of the covenant is attested to by Isaiah when he suggests that God’s “steadfast, sure love for David” is the underscoring principle. John Watts states that this new covenant’s “character and purpose are described by the devotions of David that are sure. The covenant with David . . . was unconditional and sure.”¹² The characteristics of the covenant with David are transposed onto the new covenant supplied by the Servant. For those who have come to drink the water supplied by the Servant’s redemptive work are provided the benefit of assurance; the assurance and confidence that no additional payment will be required. The assurance is provided in an unconditional covenant, and in a twist to God’s storyline, this new covenant will not be limited to the Israelites, but will have global ramifications.

Global Appeal

Isaiah’s appeal has a unique characteristic: it is not limited to Israel as an ethnic group. He is making a global appeal. As we will see in a moment, with Jesus’ teaching of this passage, the global aspect of Isaiah’s appeal is a key feature for the writers of the New Testament. First, we must answer two questions: Was Isaiah making a global appeal? Moreover, how exactly did Isaiah view God’s working being transferred from a specific ethnic group, the Israelites, to the entire planet?

The first issue to be addressed is the global appeal to be redeemed being made by Isaiah. The global redemption has already been anticipated by the reader of Isaiah prior to this point.¹³ As mentioned, Isaiah’s calling in chapter 6 speaks of the charge given by God to the prophet to warn of the coming wrath of God to deaf people. Then we

¹¹Brevard Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 435.

¹²John Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 25 (Dallas: Word, 2005), 246.

¹³Herbert Wolf, *Interpreting Isaiah: The Suffering and Glory of the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 222.

saw in chapter 55 that the work of the Servant reverses the deafness of the people and they are able to have their thirst for God quenched by water purchased by the Servant. A twist in the story occurred in chapter 24 of Isaiah, where the wrath of God is poured out against the entire planet. So just as redemption came through the judgment of Israel, Isaiah is teaching that the same is true for all people. We see the idea of the Servant's work being international in 52:14-15. "As many were astonished at you—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance. . . . Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see."¹⁴ In these two verses, "the nations and their kings will be appalled and shut their mouths because they will finally understand what God did through the servant's suffering."¹⁵ The work of the Servant provides redemption through judgment for the nations, just as it did for the people of Israel. Therefore, it is appropriate for Isaiah to tell his hearers: "A nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God" (Isa 55:5b).

The second question, of how does God transition from one ethnic group to a global appeal, is not only a critical element of chapter 55, but also a key feature emphasized by the New Testament. To see this key feature, we must return to the Israelite king, David. Isaiah 55:5 speaks of the inclusion of the nations in the redemptive work of the Servant. To rightly understand verse 5, we must recognize that it is inextricably tied to verse 4. Verse 4 describes two attributes of David that would be true of any godly king of Israel: he is a "leader and commander." Nevertheless, an additional attribute in this same verse is not generally associated with any of the kings of Israel: "witness to the peoples." Isaiah is suggesting that King David was a witness to the nations.

¹⁴Gary Smith, *Isaiah 40-66*, The New American Commentary, vol. 15B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 505.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

The way in which David is a witness is to realize that Isaiah is presenting him as depicting the Servant, or as a type of Servant. Figuratively speaking, Alec Moyter suggests that “the Servant and David are the same person.”¹⁶ Therefore, as Oswalt explains, David is a testament to the character of the Servant. David “was not so much building a kingdom as declaring the character of the one who alone can be called King of all the earth.”¹⁷ Peter Gentry writes, “A future David will bring God’s instruction and rule to all the nations.”¹⁸ The future David is the Servant, Jesus, and thankfully Isaiah does not leave us with just a vague description of how these two figures are connected.

Isaiah 55: 10-11 provides further details of the way in which David is a type of Servant. These two verses speak of the Servant as providing Scripture, or the “word that goes out from my mouth,” going out to the nations. This concept of the Word of God going out to the nations is not new in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 2:3 spoke of this very same idea: “Many peoples shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. . . . For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” Chapter 55 provides a new wrinkle to the going forth of God’s Word. Gentry writes, “Here we see that the nations which stream to Zion in 2:1-4 will receive the Torah of Yahweh through the Davidic King.”¹⁹ This is a fulfillment of what God intended for the king of his people. Deuteronomy 17:14-20 describes the attributes a king of Israel shall possess, and included in this list is the requirement that the king will write a copy of God’s law for himself and do everything prescribed therein. According to 2 Samuel 7:19, the law of the Lord manifested in the kings of Israel was

¹⁶Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 459.

¹⁷Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 440.

¹⁸Peter Gentry, “Rethinking the ‘Sure Mercies of David’ in Isaiah 55:3,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007): 294.

¹⁹Ibid.

also to be instructive for mankind. When we see the role of David as foreshadowing the kingship of the Servant, then we are able to put all these parts together. Gentry explains, “This future King then fulfills the roles required for the king in Deut. 17 and 2 Sam. 7 by bringing the divine instruction or Torah to Israel (Deut. 17) and, indeed, to all the nations (2 Sam. 7:19).”²⁰ To take things one step further, in the context of chapter 55 Isaiah is saying, come to the Servant who fully quenches thirst by fully providing the saving Word of God to all peoples, and it will not return void.

Urgent Response by Anyone Who Would Accept the Servant’s Work

We have said a lot about the Servant’s global work, Isaiah’s need for appeal is an indicator that the redemptive work of the Servant is not universally applied. He is forcefully soliciting a response from his audience, from his readers, from us.²¹ The call to respond is found in Isaiah 55:6-9. The core message from these verses is for all people to repent of their sins and turn to the Lord that he might provide forgiveness. In these verses, Isaiah clearly wants people to seek the Lord, but he places a premium on repentance.

“Seek the Lord . . . while he is near” (Isa 55:6). Paul Hanson writes that the invitation to receive “the blessing of the covenant of peace awaits them like an open door.”²² The uniqueness of this appeal should not be missed. As previously mentioned, the calling on Isaiah’s ministry in chapter 6 was initially one of unfruitful labor. Isaiah was called to preach to a people who would never understand or respond to his words. Now the call to “listen, diligently” or “listen, listen” from verse 2 shows of the reversal of

²⁰Gentry, “Rethinking the ‘Sure Mercies,’” 301.

²¹The reason for using the term “forcefully” when describing the solicitation by Isaiah is due to his chiasmic structuring of this chapter. First, it should be noted that the chapter is a self-contained unit with a “well-constructed unity. . . . The heart of the matter [vv. 6-7] must be a personal seeking of the Lord.” Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 456.

²²Paul Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1989) 180.

God. He now can be responded to because of the work of the Servant. Ed Young explains that specifically, the phrase “seek the Lord” has as its “basic meaning ‘to tread,’ and the action of seeking is probably the stepping to God, or simply the coming to him.”²³ Therefore, to seek God is to walk the path leading to God. Verse 7 prompts us to say, leave your way and walk in his ways, wanting his character to be present in our lives instead of our own wicked character. Clearly this would involve faith and trust, because we will only make our lives conform to a certain standard if we believe that the standard is in our best interest. Isaiah 55:10-11 directs us to God’s standard. God’s Word provides the instruction of how to follow in his ways. Just as David represented Jesus as a witness to the nations in verse 4, so now the Word of God is also a witness to all peoples of God’s instruction.²⁴ In addition, when his instruction is followed it produces fruit like water pouring down on seeds, which in turn “bring forth and sprout” (Isa 55:10). However, God’s Word cannot be planted where something else is already growing. If we are going to seek the Lord, then we must walk away from anything that is antithetical to God.

To walk to God and walk away from all that opposes God is to repent. Verse 7 describes, “Let the wicked forsake his way . . . let him return to the Lord.” The word for return in the Old Testament is *shuv*, which most literally means to “turn back.”²⁵ For instance, when the people marched around the city of Jericho for seven days in Joshua 6, they would “return” or *shuv* to their camp at the end of the each of the first six days.²⁶ Therefore, the word means most literally to turn and go in a different direction. When Isaiah tells the people to “return to the Lord” (Isa 55:7), it implies a turning away from

²³Ed Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972), 3:380.

²⁴Gentry, “Rethinking the ‘Sure Mercies,’” 294.

²⁵Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), s.v. “שׁוּב.”

²⁶See the use of שׁוּב in Josh 6:14.

their ways to his ways. For his thoughts and ways are not their ways, they are higher as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isa 55:8-9). I have often heard verses 8-9 misquoted to mean that God operates in ways that we cannot even comprehend, which is to miss the meaning of the text. The people of God would “put their irreligious ideas into practice through secularization and perhaps even idolatry. However, Yahweh wants them to return from their ways and lead them in a way that they did not know.”²⁷ These exiles would serve as an example to us as well, we “should turn from [our] sinful ways and thoughts because those are not God’s ways and thoughts.”²⁸ We must pick up on this notion that God’s ways are higher than our ways. It is tempting to read verse 7 and think, my ways are not overtly wicked so I have nothing from which to turn. To the contrary, God’s ways are significantly higher than our ways, so anything that is not compliant with God’s ways is wicked by comparison, and should be turned away from.

All those who turn from their wicked ways and turn to the Lord will receive full pardon and compassion. Isaiah began this chapter by making a compelling appeal for all to buy and eat in rich delightful food. Webb explains that pardon and compassion are “precisely what that delightful and satisfying food is. It is mercy and pardon, and it is freely available because it has already been paid for in full.”²⁹ The message of pardon and compassion being made available on a global scale is exactly the message Jesus was preaching, as recorded in each of the gospels, and especially in John 4 with the woman from Samaria he spoke to by a well as she drew water.

²⁷Jan Koole, *Isaiah III: Isaiah 49-55*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 2 (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, Bondgenotenlaan, 1998), 434.

²⁸Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 445.

²⁹Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, 217.

Jesus Preaching Isaiah 55

John seems to have had an ear for the invitational message of Isaiah 55. It is as if he has studied this chapter of Isaiah, and every time Jesus referred to it his ears perked up. For instance, in John 6:27 he speaks of striving for food that will not perish. In John 7:37 he quotes the encouragement to come and drink. John seems especially aware of Jesus' teaching on Isaiah 55, and John 4 parallels Isaiah 55 at several points. These specific instances should be seen cumulatively, for the connection between John and Isaiah is strengthened when taking all the parts as a collective whole.

John 4 makes reference to Isaiah 55 in four key areas. We need not spend much time on any of the areas because they are simply the outworking of Isaiah 55, which we have already discussed. At the same time, each of these areas is worth looking into because Jesus provides great insight into the application of this chapter.

Invitation to Come Drink

In John 4, Jesus famously meets a woman from Samaria by a well, and he asks her to give him a drink. She responds by questioning why a Jew would ask her for anything. Jesus tells her that if she really knew who he was she would have been the one to ask for a drink of "living water" (John 4:10). Then further into the conversation Jesus revisits this idea by saying, "The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). After hearing these words "it is hard not to think of Isaiah 55:1-3: 'Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters . . . that your soul may live.'"³⁰ The parallels are clear, Jesus is offering a spiritual drink that will provide eternal life. He also adds to our understanding by personalizing the one to whom we have to come in order to receive thirst-quenching eternal life. There is no other source but Jesus, and once we have come to him we need not go anywhere else.

³⁰D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 220.

Not only is Jesus the source for life-giving water, he is demonstrating how we may take advantage of the rich food Isaiah spoke of. Once the Samaritan woman has gone her own way, Jesus' disciples arrive on scene. They know Jesus has not eaten and they are urging him to eat something: "Rabbi eat," they say (John 4:31). Jesus responds by saying that he has eaten. He has his own source of rich food. Jesus says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34). Jesus is applying the teaching of Isaiah 55:2, 8-9. The rich food promised in Isaiah is to conform our lives to the will of the Father by following his ways and thoughts because they are higher than our own.

Water without Money or Bucket

Jesus shows up to the well unprepared. He did not bring a bucket or anything else "to draw water with" (John 4:11). This is not unlike the people Isaiah is calling to when he says, "Come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!" (Isa 55:1).³¹ The water Jesus and Isaiah are speaking of cannot be obtained by human effort, it is simply a gift from God provided by the work of Christ.

Urgent Appeal

Jesus in an almost casual way brings out the sin present in the woman's life because of her numerous relationships. Jesus knowingly says, "Go call your husband" (John 4:16). When the woman responds that she has no husband, Jesus provides a retort: "You have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true" (John 4:18). Jesus has identified the misleading attributes of the woman's response.³² He is also calling up her questionable past. Craig Keener explains

³¹While these two verses do not share any linguistic correspondence, the parallels are strong nonetheless. When the cumulative effect of having multiple points of correspondence between Isaiah and John bolsters the argument that John 4:11 is referring or echoing Isa 55:1.

³²Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:605.

that regardless of how she ended up with so many husbands and now lives with a man in a new relationship, “the woman recognized that she was in the wrong.”³³ The water Jesus is offering is precisely for sinners who have gone their own way instead of following God’s ways. Jesus tells this woman to believe in him (John 4:21, 39-40), or to use Isaiah’s words, “Seek the Lord” (55:6).

Global Appeal

Upon confronting the sinful lifestyle of the woman by the well, she appears to respond by diverting the conversation away from her sin to another topic. Her shift in conversation may not be as evasive as some have supposed. The prophetic words of Jesus have sparked in her an inquiry as to what is acceptable worship for salvation from sin.³⁴ Jesus responds by telling her that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). Jesus’ words about the origins of salvation are reminiscent of Isaiah 55:5: “A nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel.” What Isaiah saw in the future is now a reality because of Jesus; all the nations can have the salvation that began with the Jews. John Pryor writes, “Any claimed revelation which [previously] drew worshippers to Jerusalem or Mount Gerezim now falls away before the ultimacy of Jesus.”³⁵ It is the work of the Servant, as Isaiah speaks of it, which affords the nations the opportunity to receive salvation and be included among the children of God.

Conclusion

Jesus is using an interaction with a skeptical woman to inform the world of the salvation he offers. He is showing a watching world that salvation is from the Jews but is

³³Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 235.

³⁴Keener, *The Gospel of John*, 610.

³⁵John Pryor, *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People; The Narrative and Themes of the Fourth Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992) 22.

now made available to all who would repent and trust in him. A repentance will require forsaking sin by turning from it and turning to Christ. Seeking Christ is the most fundamental teaching from Jesus as he interacts with the woman at the well, but the attribute that really describes Jesus' interaction is an appeal. He is appealing to a Samaritan woman to believe in a Jewish savior. He is making the very same appeal that Isaiah made a little more than 700 years before. Isaiah's desire was that all the nations might take advantage of the work of Jesus, the Servant, by coming to the water of the living well to drink of that which has already been paid for.

CHAPTER 8

SERMON 8: VINEYARD WARNING

Americans suffer from “unwarranted optimism,” argues Barbara Ehrenreich in her book, *Bright-Sided*.¹ She suggests that as a people “we are upbeat, cheerful, optimistic, and shallow, while foreigners are likely to be subtle, world-weary, and possibly decadent.”² Ehrenreich sees the unrelenting optimism of the American people as reckless and damaging. She goes so far as to suggest that the American sense of optimism led to the “reckless buildup of bad debt and dodgy loans” that resulted in the housing market collapse of the mid-2000s.³ While she may be overstating the effects of optimism and downplaying the influence of other contributing factors, such as greed, she is one of the few voices questioning whether we should always expect a positive outcome. For instance, she recognizes, and rightly so, the prevalence of unbridled optimism in Christian circles. She writes, “By any quantitative measure, the most successful preachers today are the positive thinkers, who no longer mention sin.”⁴ This is not to say that what we need is a shot of pessimism, but we do need to be able to recognize negative aspects of society. Unrelenting optimism can cause us to miss warning signs of a society headed in the wrong direction. To this end, we can learn from history. We can learn from people who have gone before us and failed to recognize the warning signs of a coming catastrophe—we are not the first society to think we will continue to progress in affluence regardless of faith in God and

¹Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Co., 2009), 1.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 181.

⁴Ibid., 124.

moral behavior. Isaiah is preaching to an audience that is eerily similar to our own; his audience is the Bible belt south of Israel. He is preaching to them about the consequences of their actions. However, even in the midst of this warning of judgment is the hope of being redeemed.

I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, “Here I am, here I am,” to a nation that was not called by my name. I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks; who sit in tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat pig’s flesh, and broth of tainted meat is in their vessels; who say, “Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you.” These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all the day. Behold, it is written before me: “I will not keep silent, but I will repay; I will indeed repay into their lap both your iniquities and your fathers’ iniquities together, says the LORD; because they made offerings on the mountains and insulted me on the hills, I will measure into their lap payment for their former deeds.” Thus says the LORD: “As the new wine is found in the cluster, and they say, ‘Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it,’ so I will do for my servants’ sake, and not destroy them all. I will bring forth offspring from Jacob, and from Judah possessors of my mountains; my chosen shall possess it, and my servants shall dwell there. Sharon shall become a pasture for flocks, and the Valley of Achor a place for herds to lie down, for my people who have sought me. But you who forsake the LORD, who forget my holy mountain, who set a table for Fortune and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny, I will destine you to the sword, and all of you shall bow down to the slaughter, because, when I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not listen, but you did what was evil in my eyes and chose what I did not delight in.” Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, my servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry; behold, my servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty; behold, my servants shall rejoice, but you shall be put to shame; behold, my servants shall sing for gladness of heart, but you shall cry out for pain of heart and shall wail for breaking of spirit. You shall leave your name to my chosen for a curse, and the Lord GOD will put you to death, but his servants he will call by another name, so that he who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by the God of truth, and he who takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God of truth; because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my eyes. (Isa 65:1-16)

The turning point in the passage is found in verse 8 when a cluster of good grapes is found and one of the farmhands cries out, “Do not destroy it!”⁵ The implication is that up until that point in the passage Isaiah had been describing a vineyard that is not

⁵For the idea that v. 8 functions as a turning point by connecting vv. 1-7 with 9-16, see John Goldingay, *Isaiah 56-66*. The International Critical Commentary (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 454; and Gary Smith, *Isaiah 40-66*, The New American Commentary, vol. 15B (Nashville: Broadman Holman, 2009), 708-09.

worth saving and should be destroyed. What is Isaiah attempting to show us in this vineyard vignette? The prophet is showing the consequences of rejecting God. Five elements must be considered in this passage in order to discover the message Isaiah hopes for us to apply to our lives. (1) God is rejected by his vineyard, (2) the vineyard is going to burn, (3) one little cluster is found, (4) a remnant is discovered, and (5) a vineyard warning.

God Is Rejected by His Own Vineyard

God has made himself available to a group of “his” people, we might say a group of “church goers,” but they have rejected him. These people should be a fruit-producing vineyard, but they have failed to produce fruit because they rejected the gardener. To see how the vineyard has turned away from the gardener we shall look at the what, who, and how of rejection.

What is rejected: God’s invitation. First, notice the character of God, the God of the Bible, the God of the Old Testament as he personally reaches out to the people of Israel. “Here I am, here I am” (Isa 65:1). Alec Motyer suggests that this personal approach demonstrates that “the Lord has taken the initiative in relation to people who neither asked for him nor sought him.”⁶ God is not distant, or just looking for the moment he can strike us down, as some might characterize the “God of the Old Testament.” He is making himself personally available to the nation of Israel. God is seen in this passage as reaching out to his people. The posture of spread hands is usually directed toward God by someone who is praying.⁷ In other words, as John Goldingay writes, God is “behaving

⁶Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 528.

⁷Goldingay, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 56-66*, 444, writes, “Spreading out the hands, too is usually the posture of a suppliant (e.g. 1:15; Exod. 9:29, 33; 1 Kgs 8:22, 38; Pss 44:21 [20]; 143:6; Job 11:13; Lam. 1:17; Ezra 9:5; 2 Chr. 6:12, 13, 29).”

the way people properly behave in relation to God.”⁸ He holds this position “all the day” (Isa 65:2). Gary Smith explains that God is “offering to help and to care for them; he did not hide his face as they claim in 64:7.”⁹ However, the people continue to rebel against God and walk in their own ways.

God’s outstretched hands are an attempt to stop his people from walking “in a way that is not good” (Isa 65:2). The availability of God is not unique to the Old Testament. John Oswalt writes, “Paul takes up vv. 1-2 in Romans 10:20-21, applying v. 1a to the way God has become available to peoples other than Israel in his day, and v. 2a to the way God has reached out to Israel in vain in [Paul's] day.”¹⁰ Jesus describes the rejection of God in Matthew 23:37: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Jesus too has come with open arms in order to lead his people away from rejection, but they also rejected him. The question is, have we rejected God as he has sought to stop us from walking down the path of destruction? God may have spoken through a friend, a radio station, or a preacher about the truth of his Word, only to be ignored because we assume it is for another day or another person. God stood as an obstacle in the way of their sin, but the people of Israel found a way to work around him and squeeze by. We must make sure that we do not do the same.

Next is the who of rejection: People who already have all the religion they need. The people in Isaiah’s audience know the Bible, for Isaiah 65:11 tells us that they have forsaken the Lord. Clearly, to forsake the Lord is only done by people who first

⁸Goldingay, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 56-66*, 444.

⁹Smith, *Isaiah 40-66*, 701.

¹⁰John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 648.

knew God and his Word. Furthermore, they have known the promise of God’s “holy mountain” (Isa 65:11), which is to say that they have known the promise of the Messiah and the promise of a new creation, but rejected the Messiah and his redeemed creation.¹¹ Goldingay writes that these people have “abandoned pure worship that covenant obedience demands and have gone to other gods.”¹² Yet they believe they are too holy to even be confronted (Isa 65:5). These religious elitists never turn and compare themselves to God; instead, as Motyer describes, they measure themselves on a set of “special experiences or claims such as find no place in the Bible.”¹³ If we lose sight of God’s standard, we too can begin to compare ourselves to others based on a false standard.

We are particularly prone to make comparisons with those around us and presume that we are in the clear when really we are comparing ourselves to a poor standard. For instance, I recently read about a study discussing the correlations between social contact and weight loss.¹⁴ The researchers found that if a person desiring to lose weight had a majority of their social contact with a person of equal or greater size they never actually lost any weight. Those who spent time with thinner people actually lost weight. Therefore, to some degree, it is intrinsic within us to find validation of ourselves by making comparison with those around us. The problem is not the comparisons that we make, but to whom we compare ourselves. If our standard of holiness is not based upon God and instead based on those we surround ourselves with, then we are prone to justify our own sinful action. Comparison-holiness leads to rejection of God. The people Isaiah

¹¹The reference to “my holy mountain” is taken up again later in the chapter (Isa 65:25), and is used to describe the place of God’s new redeemed creation. The Messianic connection is found in Isaiah’s use of the term in v. 11:9. The passage in chap. 11 is a description of the Messianic figure who will come from the shoot of the stump of Jesse and will have the Spirit of the Lord resting upon him.

¹²Goldingay, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 56-66*, 445.

¹³Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 532.

¹⁴Matthew Anderson and Nicholas Christakis, “Desire for Weight Loss, Weight Related Social Contact, and Body Mass Outcomes,” *Obesity* 4, no. 7 (July 2016): 1434-37.

is describing were looking at those surrounding them and declaring themselves holy, when really, they were providing an excuse for their own sin and rejection of God's standard in the process.

Lastly, we have the how of rejection: The manner in which the people rejected God. Isaiah shows that the people who reject God put their trust in something other than the Creator, and they, especially, should not have made this mistake since they had ample examples of people in the past who failed to trust God. We can see that they trusted in something other than the Creator in verses 3 and 4. In these verses, the people are participating in a specific type of false sacrifice. The first part of verse 4 explains verse 3.¹⁵ The gardens are graveyards and the people would bring offerings to consult the advice of their dead family members. They felt like they were hearing from the dead who had passed on before them and then based life decisions upon these inspirations. Goldingay explains, "It involves sacrificing to images of ourselves in the fertile gardens . . . and groves that symbolize the life force we are trying to harness."¹⁶

The people thought there was a way of life that they could tap into apart from God. They wanted to gain an advantage in life, and if the spirit of a deceased relative could provide the insight needed, then they were willing to make a sacrifice. It is not unlike us—it would be nice to catch a break and get ahead for once, even if we have to make some sacrifices. When following God did not get them everything they wanted, it became time to try something else. And "as Calvin says, superstitions result from the delight of humans in their own inventions. When we refuse to surrender our own ways and thoughts for God's . . . the result is paganism, however it may be garbed."¹⁷ The

¹⁵Goldingay, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 56-66*, 447, explains, "Verse 4a makes more specific the likely implication of the preceding line. The gardens are graveyards and people are there with offerings in connection with making contact with their dead family members in order to consult them."

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 638.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

people were not innocent, for they should have learned from the example of their forefathers who rejected God in the very same manner.

In verse 7, Isaiah says the people will pay for their sins. God had been patient with his people, but they should not think his patience means he has forgotten their transgressions. The sins of the people are “written before” God, like a divine sticky note (Isa 65:6). John Calvin explains, “The Lord has no need of writing as an aid to memory; but he makes use of this form of expression, that we may not think that he has forgotten anything.”¹⁸ Not only will God require “payment for their former deeds,” he will require payment for both their iniquities and their “father’s iniquities” (Isa 65:7).

What is meant by the idea that the people of Israel will be punished for the iniquity of their fathers? Does God hold us accountable for our relatives that have gone before us? First, the Bible clearly teaches that a person will not be punished for their father’s sin. Both Jeremiah 31:29-34 and Ezekiel 18:20 make clear that God will not hold a child accountable for the failings of their father. The second answer is that commentators going back centuries have understood the passage to be saying, your fathers serve as an ancient example of what not to do.¹⁹ Because the people have a clear, longstanding example of sin and its consequences, they are more guilty. The idea that the example of the fathers’ failings causes the children to be guilty of a more grievous offense may not sit well with our modern sensibilities. There is a notion that if the parents fall prey to a particular sin it is an excuse for the children. The logic seems to be that if a parent was abusive, then the children are prone to commit the same sin because that is what they have seen modeled. This verse reverses that line of thinking. The parent’s failings do not serve as a crutch but an indictment on anyone who would follow in those footsteps. Therefore, the guilt of those in the vineyard who have rejected God is doubled.

¹⁸John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (London: T. Constable, 1853), 4:384.

¹⁹Ibid.

God Is Going to Burn the Whole Vineyard Down

Isaiah has clearly laid out the rejection of God by his people, the vineyard. We now turn our attention to the result of this rejection, namely, destroying the rebellious vineyard. The burning of the vineyard appears to come as a surprise to those who considered their holiness untouchable. In the end of the previous chapter (Isa. 64:12), the people ask God, “Will you restrain yourself at these things, O Lord?” The people hoped God would not hold back any longer but retaliate against Israel’s enemies by speaking judgment against them. John Watts writes, “Instead, he breaks his silence to announce judgment against [his own people].”²⁰ God’s response to the rejection by his people begins with the expressive language in verse 5: “These are a smoke in my nostrils.”

The Hebrew language is very expressive and God’s wrath or anger is often described by the phrase his “nose grows hot.”²¹ The expression clearly does not mean God’s nostrils are filled with the irritating smell of smoke, no, the smoke is a result of his burning anger. This understanding is made apparent by the Psalmist when he writes: “Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him” (Ps 18:7-8). The smoke coming from God’s nostrils is an indication of the fire smoldering within. The description of smoke in Isaiah 65 parallels Psalm 18 where God’s nostrils are described as smoking, and wrath is being poured forth like a devouring fire.

In Isaiah’s case, there is a severity to the fire spilling forth from God, the fire is poured out directly into the lap. Isaiah 65:6 says, “I will not keep silent, but I will repay; I will indeed repay into their lap.” There are two ways of interpreting this phrase. First, the lap is in reference to a fold in the robe commonly worn in that day—the robes would

²⁰John Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 25 (Dallas: Word, 2005), 347.

²¹My translation. See also Num 22:22 uses the phrase נִיָּסַרְר־אָף אֶל־הַיָּם to describe God as angry and it would literally be translated, God’s nose burned or grew hot.

have been stretched out to carry items; just like we might hold out the bottom of a t-shirt to carry a bunch of apples.²² The fire from God is being poured out right into their bosom or mid-section. The second way of understanding the reference to the lap is as referring to “the bosom which is the area of the heart.”²³ That is to suggest that God is pouring out his wrath on the person’s inner self.²⁴ However, both references may be in view, as Oswalt suggests “repayment will not be on the periphery, but will go to the very center of life.”²⁵ God’s response to rejection is unavoidable and all-consuming judgment.

The destruction of the vineyard is described five different ways in verses 13-14: “You shall be hungry . . . you shall be thirsty . . . you shall be put to shame . . . you shall cry out for pain of heart . . . you shall wail for breaking of spirit.” And then the death knell comes in verse 15 as the judgment is finalized: “The Lord your God will put you to death.” The scene being described is of a vineyard that has rejected the farmer and has failed to produce fruit. Therefore, the farmer, who was once patient, has become infuriated with the vineyard and is going to set fire to the vines and burn it to the ground.

One Little Cluster Found

The farmhands are walking out into the vineyard, torches in hand, ready to set fire to every vine, when one of them cries out: “Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it” (Isa 65:8). One cluster of grapes is found that can produce new wine (Isa 65:8). The ability to produce new wine means the cluster contains a blessing. The term “blessing” in

²²Jan Koole, *Isaiah III: Isaiah 56-66*, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 3 (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2001), 421, writes, “קָיָה may in . . . the context rather suggest the ample fold of a robe in which people collect and keep all kinds of things, including money.” An example of this is found in Ruth 3:15: “And he said, ‘Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out.’ So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her.”

²³Smith, *Isaiah 40-66*, 705.

²⁴Koole, *Isaiah 56-66*, 421.

²⁵Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 641.

the Bible describes the ability to give increase.²⁶ Through God's work, this one cluster may contain the ability to replenish the vineyard. Finding a cluster of good grapes that can bring forth new wine gives hope to the idea that transformation can take place. Isaiah brings out the thought of transformation in verse 10 with a reference to Sharon and the Valley of Achor. Isaiah has previously referred to Sharon in chapters 33 to describe a desolate place. Achor is a reference to the Valley of Achor mentioned in Joshua 7:24. Achor from that point forward became a symbol of a bright start being squandered. Then, in chapter 35, Isaiah describes Sharon as being turned around by Messianic renewal.²⁷ Motyer writes, "Therefore, the picture is of restoration (Sharon will be what it was meant to be) and transformation (Achor with all threat removed). Nothing will mar this new beginning."²⁸ Restoration does not come by the removal of God's judgment, but out of the judgment comes one cluster from which salvation will come. Despite the burning judgment that will consume the vineyard, there is hope in future redemption described as new wine. This type of restoration leaves us with one question in particular: What caused one group of people to be considered a good cluster, or new wine, eligible for restoration?

We just spoke about the destruction to be poured out upon the vineyard because of Israel's rejection of God. As mentioned (in the what, who and how of rejection), those who rejected God had a specific set of qualities or characteristics. Now we turn our attention to those are being saved, the cluster, because clearly we want to implement or duplicate their same qualities or characteristics in our own lives. We find only one quality or characteristic: They were chosen servants. Isaiah 65:8 declared that a cluster was found that would pour forth blessing. Then in verse 9, the blessing is described in more

²⁶J. Penderson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 1:182-83.

²⁷Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 532.

²⁸*Ibid.*

detail: “I will bring forth offspring from Jacob.” The characteristics of the offspring pouring forth are twofold: chosen and servants (65:9b). The notion of God’s choosing is brought out explicitly by the reference to bringing forth people from Jacob and Judah. The line of promise was passed from Jacob to Judah despite their individual failures to manifest the character of God. These two patriarchs are simply chosen by God.

We might find it discouraging that one of the core characteristics, being chosen is out of our control. Why would Isaiah tell about something out of our control? For that matter, why does the Bible as a whole speak about God’s chosen people? The simplest answer is, grace. Getting what we have earned is not grace. The truth about humanity is that we are all vines in an unproductive vineyard about to be burned to the ground in eternal punishment. The just response for all who have rejected God is to face his smoldering wrath. The vineyard deserves to be burned for its rejection, so when God chooses to spare one cluster he is being gracious. Not only has the cluster been chosen, they will inherit an eternal paradise described in Isaiah 65:17, and then reiterated in Revelation 21, further grace.

Vineyard Warning: Are You in the Chosen Cluster?

The message from Isaiah is that God is going to destroy everyone unless you are chosen. At first glance, Isaiah appears to be simply making a statement, a statement with no application. If that were the case, then Isaiah’s prophesy would not even be worth saying. The passage is worth saying because it functions as a warning to people who think they are holy apart from God.²⁹ Two groups need to hear this warning. The thought that Isaiah is warning people that they are not chosen sounds nonsensical, but this oxymoron is also taken up by the New Testament writers. Like Isaiah, Peter warns his hearers regarding their election (2 Pet 1:10). Peter defines the oxymoron by encouraging his hearers to confirm their election. In other words, you should examine your life to see

²⁹Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66*, 635.

if you are feeling reassured of your salvation based upon a false pretense. Thomas Schreiner explains, “Peter did not tolerate those who claimed to be Christians but contradicted the claim by their behavior.”³⁰ Therefore, the first group that needs to hear the warning of Isaiah are those who have assumed they were chosen because they grew up in the Bible belt south and have a heritage of religion. The primary defense for this group in the Israelite Bible belt south was to consider themselves holy, but entirely on false pretenses. We must examine ourselves as to whether or not we are chosen. It will begin by being honest.

The second group needing to hear Isaiah’s message also live in the Bible belt south. Isaiah’s audience is the nation of Israel, and specifically he is preaching to the southern kingdom of Judah. As previously mentioned, Judah has the Temple and a heritage of faithful religion, but they have lost their faith and trust in God. So Isaiah is warning those around him that they should not have a false sense of spiritual security. Isaiah is warning them that the moral failure of the nation is about to lead to their collapse and exile.

Similarly, we have inherited a Bible belt south that has a heritage of faith. However, the heritage we have inherited can give a false sense of security based upon a false sense of spiritual security. In the south, the people around us may look to more secular portions of the country and conclude that they are more holy and therefore fine. The second group needing to hear the message of Isaiah are followers of Christ living in the Bible belt south. As followers of Christ we must play the role of Isaiah and warn those around us that they are not God’s chosen unless they have faith in Christ.

³⁰Thomas Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter Jude*, The New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 305.

Conclusion

Whether you are a follower of Christ or have developed a false sense of security because of an inherited faith, you need to hear the vineyard warning. For God's patience with the Bible belt south should not be mistaken as approval and acceptance of moral and spiritual decline. When the vineyard rejects the farmer, he must eventually burn it all down. God promises to burn down the vineyard of people who are claiming to be followers of Christ simply because they have a heritage of religion or appear to be better than the more secular parts of the world. We must recognize the attributes of rejection in our own time, and then heed the warning of Isaiah 65. Finally, as we recognize the rejection of God we must share a message of warning. The warning is for all those who believe themselves to be too holy to confirm their own election.

EPILOGUE

The core of this project has been to utilize the principles of biblical theology in the process of developing and delivering of sermons. The particular structure of this project was to preach a series of seven sermons from the book of Isaiah, and the previous seven chapters contained the manuscripts for each of those seven sermons. The sermons collectively sought to demonstrate a single biblical theological theme from the book of Isaiah. The chosen theme was the hope of redemption comes through judgment. In other words, God did not provide redemption by first removing judgment, but judgment was necessary for redemption.

One of the goals of this project has been to demonstrate that the theme of “the hope of redemption comes through judgment” is a *central* theme within the book of Isaiah. The centrality of this theme was demonstrated by Isaiah’s inclusion of it in his introductory chapters, which set forth his multifaceted agenda for the book. The centrality is also conveyed through the pervasiveness of the theme of redemption through judgment across the entire book of Isaiah.

Choosing a central theme has been beneficial in three key ways. First, the theme stretches across the entire corpus of Isaiah. Therefore, the sermon series provided an opportunity to survey the entire landscape of Isaiah in an overview fashion. Second, the choice of a central theme also allowed the congregation to see the interconnectedness of the seven messages. Third, this theme is pervasive across the canon of Scripture. Bringing out this theme in Isaiah naturally lent itself to demonstrating the interconnectedness of Isaiah with the rest of the Bible through tools of biblical theology (i.e., typology, imagery, and allusion). Furthermore, it became apparent that the theme of redemption coming through judgment is a thematic pattern reflected throughout the

Bible, and is particularly reflected in the gospel.

Patterns in Scripture allow us to see how God operates, and patterns encourage us to think that God will operate in these same ways in the future. Upon recognizing the theme of redemption through judgment as a pattern in across Scripture, I was able to apply this theme more broadly. I began to think of how this pattern is applicable in my context. I realized that patterns are prophetic predictors of the future. So, for instance, many have recognized the decline of churches in the United States over the past several years.¹ In light of the thematic pattern of redemption coming through judgment, one is led to conclude that it would not be unreasonable to think that the way God may chose to redeem his church in the United States is through persecution (a form of judgment). Therefore, the pattern of redemption through judgment has implications for the twenty-first century.

My course of study also afforded me the opportunity to better understand the book of Isaiah. One of the key findings from this process was the way in which the book is structured. I divided the book solely thematically into two parts: Isaiah 1-39 as largely conveying a message of judgment and, Isaiah 40-66 as largely conveying a message of redemption. This thematic analysis is accurate to a degree, but it does not recognize the function of the two kings, Ahaz and Hezekiah, in the prophetic message of Isaiah. It would be helpful for further study to develop the theme of redemption through judgment in light of the role these two kings play in the book of Isaiah.

I did benefit from the biblical theological approach to Scripture reflected in my project, and I have begun to apply biblical theology to my regular sermon preparation. Therefore, the church I serve has also directly benefited. The most direct and substantial benefit of the project has been the direct inclusion of the gospel into each sermon I

¹See the findings of the Pew Research Center, "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," November 3, 2015, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

preach. Previously, I sought to include the gospel into each sermon, but all too often that resulted in a disjointed mention of the gospel as part of the conclusion to a message—now the gospel is the crux of the message. That change is directly attributable to this project. I am better equipped to connect the Bible as a whole to Christ and his work on the cross. Therefore, I have begun to more faithfully represent the gospel in every passage of Scripture, regardless of it is found in the New Testament or the Old Testament. Thankfully, the congregation has responded to this change in sermon content through their feedback. In particular, they have spoken of having a better grasp of how Jesus connects to the Old Testament, for which I am especially grateful.

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ABSTRACT

ISAIAH'S THEME OF JUDGMENT AND REDEMPTION PREACHED TO THE CONGREGATION OF FIRST CALVARY BAPTIST CHURCH

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Redemption does not occur by God's removing his judgment; instead, redemption comes through judgment. This project demonstrates the theme of redemption through judgment from the book of Isaiah in seven sermons.

The first sermon sets the stage by demonstrating the contrast elements of judgment and redemption in Isaiah 4. Then, Isaiah's call into ministry is considered, and the message of judgment he is called to proclaim. Judgment is not limited to Israel; ultimately it is a global sentence, as depicted in the third sermon from Isaiah 24. The fourth sermon provides the first glimmer of hope by showing judgment and its reversal in Isaiah 39-40. The next two sermons flesh out the redemption that is ushered in by judgment in Isaiah 44 and 55 respectively. The final sermon brings redemption from judgment full circle by showing God's ultimate plan from humanity in Isaiah 65.

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