

"Oracles"
Isaiah 17:1 - 21:17
Lin Sarfaraz

Memory verse: Isaiah 17:10a

"You have forgotten God your Savior; you have not remembered the Rock, your fortress."

Overview

As often happens when you are preparing to lecture for our lessons, Satan attacks. With me he only needs to make me too busy to stress me out. In fact, two weeks ago I had a meltdown in my kitchen one morning, something we women do when we feel over tired and overwhelmed. At our last meeting my prayer request in my small group was for Satan to be pushed away and to be protected from his attacks. I needed quiet time without distractions to focus on writing my lecture. Well ... if you prayed for me, your prayers were answered.

The very next day my car broke down. I was left stranded in a parking lot with a frozen gear shift. The only solution was to call Auto Club, have my car towed to the mechanic, and to walk home. My car was out of commission for the weekend. That gave me the quiet, uninterrupted time I needed at home. I laughed to myself because I could see that prayer being answered, even if it wasn't in the way I expected. Instead of a busy weekend running errands around town, I was forced to stay at home. Voila! Uninterrupted time to write a lecture. ... So, let's get into this!

Let's pray Loving Father, _____

Thomas Aquinas said, "To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible."

Tonight let's talk about the ending first A few weeks ago, Dennis reminded us how blessed we are today. We are so blessed to study Isaiah because we already know the outcome. Jesus returns! And God wins!

Here's the key point to tonight's lecture. God wants us to consecrate all things to Him, from our daily lives to the path of our nations. End of story! We can all go home now ... but let's stay anyway and understand what the woe oracles mean, and how they are relevant to our lives today.

Oracles are the words of God, generally given as warnings of destruction. They are commonly referred to as "woe oracles." This week we studied the woe oracles concerning:

- Damascus, also known as Ephraim
- Egypt, also called Cush, and considered Ancient Ethiopia
- Babylon, called the Desert of the Sea by Isaiah
- Dumah, another name for Edom
- Arabia

Isaiah uses these nations to present three aspects of God's character, God's wrath, his Word and his Will. God's moral integrity is His Wrath.

Man's pride is refusing to yield himself to God. By doing this he creates certain conditions which God has ordained to harm him and those around him. Yet sin has its consequences. The fact is that God allows His wrath, His moral integrity against sin, to be manifest precisely because it affords Him the opportunity to display His love toward mankind.

The Wrath of God is powerful, but it is under control. Its purpose is:

- to bring repentance,
- to demonstrate God's moral integrity,
- to afflict those comfortable in sin, and
- to comfort the afflicted with hope that comes from the knowledge that God is still in control of men and nations.

The Word of God is the warning of judgment to come. Isaiah warned his people that a day will come with a harvest of disease and pain if they don't turn back to God. The Word of God tells us that:

- trusting the work of our hands brings no security,
- people can disappoint us,
- pride brings a fall,
- rebellion against God brings disaster, and that
- repentance brings mercy and forgiveness.

The Will of God is that we are obedient to Him. God's will for Isaiah was to publicly humiliate himself by wearing the clothes of a slave (a loincloth) and no shoes for three years. Isaiah obeyed the Lord's direction and let his actions do his preaching. But I think there was more to it than that

Imagine ... Isaiah walking around Jerusalem and the people naked, with his buttocks exposed, for ... not just a week, or a month, or even for a year ... but for three years! When I read these chapters in preparation, I thought ... oh swell! Isaiah is walking around naked and barefoot for three years. What am I gonna do with this? Well don't be nervous, I don't plan to give you an object lesson tonight.

Clearly, walking around Jerusalem naked is the picture of transparency. Everything is exposed for all to see. There is no hiding of anything. But I believe God had a different message in mind with Isaiah's object lesson to the people.

By obeying God's command, Isaiah performed a symbolic act. The prophet took off his clothes to appear as a prisoner marching into exile, symbolizing what would happen to the people with their new Ethiopian leaders who had taken control of Egypt. Archeological wall reliefs from Assyria and Babylonia show captives being marched into exile completely naked and bound. Isaiah's act would have had great effect in Judah, especially since it lasted 3 years. Isaiah finally got across to Judah for a brief time his message that trusting in political alliances was futile. Only trusting in God pays off. Neither Egypt nor Philistia made good allies. God is the only perfect ally.

My impressions of Isaiah's act is that those captured by sin are carried away naked and barefoot. Isaiah walking around Jerusalem in such a state reminds me of the image of Adam and Eve being cast from Eden after the first sin and becoming aware of their nakedness.



It is also an image of Christ hanging on the cross, naked and barefoot.

I can see how nakedness is a sign of man's sin and exposure to the world. In one case a naked man and woman are cast out of the perfect garden. In the other case, God's own Son took the nakedness and sin of all and paid for our Redemption. It is interesting to me that sin is what exposes us to the world. It leaves us unclothed and unprotected.

Isaiah's message is that the Wrath of God is written about in the Word of God so that we might listen and learn and be obedient to the Will of God. God's will is that we make him The Lord of our life and the love of our life.

I cannot talk about Isaiah's nakedness without standing before you with a bit of my own. I am a child of divorce and estranged from my mother for the past 5 years. Of course, there is a story to that. There were hurtful words thrown out in rage and revenge, words so damaging that they destroyed several family relationships. I have analyzed for most of my adult life, how did I come to be in this position? How did I get here, in my 60's, estranged from my own mother in the twilight years of her life? This is not how it should be. I believe this is not what God intended for our family.

I praise God so much for our studies in People of the Word, especially this year in Isaiah. I can see how our family is in this situation because of pride, self-pride, as its root cause. 50 years ago, my mother decided that she deserved more in life and sought to divorce my father. That decision and the actions that followed destroyed four lives in its wake.

My father was her perceived scapegoat and he was persecuted as such. However, what my mother intended for evil, God used for good. By the end of his life my father, a believer, was a living witness of faithfulness and longsuffering to his children and grandchildren. I learned about endurance in life from watching him.

I have one brother, who escaped the pain of those years by using drugs. He has been totally clean only for the past 5 years. I coped with the divorce conflict by becoming an over achiever, obsessively pursuing perfection, and attempting suicide twice when things were too crazy. She cannot admit her own responsibility, but that decision destroyed my mother's own life as well. Today she sits alone in her apartment, having driven everyone away by her blaming and anger and feelings of entitlement, unable to understand why everyone has abandoned her.

In therapy I have described my adolescent and teen years as being a "Prisoner of Divorce War." POW meant something different to me then. Now it stands for "People of the Word"

Now does this sound a little like our nations in the woe oracles to you? Does this sound a bit like Assyria, Babylon and Moab? It sure does to me. However, I have been in our studies enough years, and sat in our small groups hearing your prayer requests to know that many of you have concerns for your adult children and your grandchildren who themselves are in a "divorce war." If you have never experienced divorce in your own lives, you may feel at a loss of what to do.

My brother and I survived as we have directly because of the influence of our own grandparents, as well as our aunts and uncles. I thought it might be a practical help to share with you some tips for being a grandparent in this situation.

1. Be there! Whatever manner that takes for you with your grandchildren, be present in their lives. But listen to them without your own judgment. They desperately need someone to hear them.
2. Be merciful to the other parent who is not your child. They are your grandchild's other parent. Your grandchild's self-esteem depends on it. Over the years I learned that it is normal for children to blame themselves for the divorce. They believe that if dad hates mom, then he hates that part of me that is like mom. And if mom hates dad, then she hates that part of me that is like dad. Sadly, I

was 25 years old before I fully understood that my parents' divorce was not my fault.

3. Be comforting. After all these are children of war, just like children from Afghanistan and Iraq. Sometimes they just need a safe, peaceful place to just "be." You may be their only oasis from the pain of a divided home.
4. Be their role model. Children of divorce may not have modeling in the home to help them become healthy, balanced husbands and wives themselves. In my 20's I found myself watching my aunts and uncles intently because I so wanted to not make the same mistakes as my parents.
5. Be authentic! When my father passed, I saved his desk and dresser to pack myself. I figured if there were any skeletons in his closet, they were best kept a secret with his daughter. What I found was evidence that my dad was the real deal. His drawers were filled with slips of paper with Bible verses that comforted and encouraged him through difficult times. I saw with my own eyes the source of his strength. These slips of Bible verses are precious treasures for me today.

So how do we protect ourselves from becoming guilty of self pride? We do that by honestly and sincerely admitting our own sin before God. To bring us back to our memory verse, we remember God as:

- Our Savior
- Our Rock and
- Our Fortress.

In defending ourselves from attack and the self pride of others, we need to avoid the instinct for retaliation and revenge. Only one thing can save us from becoming vengeful people, a belief in Divine Vengeance.

Ray Ortland in *God Saves Sinners* says, "When confidence in God's fierce opposition to all human injustice enters our hearts, we have a reason to forsake our savage impulses and love our enemies." If we don't have a just God to trust in, we have no logical reason to not become violent ourselves. It is Isaiah's vision of God's final justice that moderates our anger and frustration in the present. God has promised to step in decisively and to punish all wrong with absolute finality.

What the Old Testament calls "the day of the Lord," the New Testament calls "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ," because Jesus is the one through whom God will judge the world and bring us into eternal peace. He is the reason we can live in this present moment of insanity with redemptive tolerance.

Romans 12:17-19 (NIV)

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."

The point is that evil is out of our control. But evil, like Lucifer, is within God's control. Isaiah's prophecy about these nations, in particular about Babylon, is about more than the historic nations. "Babylon" is Biblical code language for the entire social framework of human defiance of God, pushing and shoving its way through all of human history. It began at the Tower of Babel and continues until the second coming of Christ. From Isaiah's point of view, our world is one vast "Babylon."

Isaiah is teaching us that the day of the Lord includes both the final intervention by God at the end of time and each occasion in our lives when he steps in to enforce His just will. Isaiah's basic point is that individuals are judged in eternity, but nations are judged in time. With that understanding we are able to live and survive in the midst of madness.

In these woe oracles Isaiah is proclaiming three primary truths:

- God opposes the proud
- Our God reigns
- Look to Him

Isaiah's point is that pride is the spirit of the world. **Our pride is what is wrong with the whole world.** Self-worship is THE religion of mankind, though that self-exaltation takes different forms.

Philippians 2:3-4

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

James 4:6

"God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

1 Peter 5:6

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

If humility is the spirit of Christ, then our pride is the spirit of the anti-Christ. One thought for me is, when does self-esteem shift or tip over into self-pride and arrogance? In other words, how does one possess a healthy self-esteem and avoid the sin and problems that self-pride brings? What is that tipping point?

First you need to define self-esteem and pride. I searched online and actually found a website for a National Association for Self-Esteem or NASE (www.self-esteem-nase.org). They define self-esteem as the experience of being capable of meeting life's challenges and being worthy of happiness. They further state that they believe in personal responsibility and accountability.

Charles Stanley in *Landmines in the Path of the Believer* says, "Pride is giving ourselves credit for something that God has accomplished. ... Pride is essentially self-worship."

God's cure for pride, haughtiness and egotism is Meekness and Humility. Meekness is not something weak or passive. Meekness is not self-will. It is willing to submit yourself to achieve what is good for others. Meekness is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. It requires great self-control, and that is hard.

So, I believe that the 'tipping point' between self-esteem and self-pride is to ask, whom does this serve? Am I serving myself, solely for my own benefit at the price of others? Or does this make it possible for me to serve God and others more effectively?

Our God reigns in unchallenged sovereignty. Through Isaiah God sent a warning to Damascus, Egypt, Babylon, Dumah and Arabia. God warned of their impending judgment because they loved their idols and false gods rather than looking to Him. The oracles described the fear and terror they would feel, cowering in caves, losing their cities, possessions & livestock to the armies God would send. Their leaders and wise counselors would be reduced to fools and die by the sword. Their resources would dry up. Babylon, Dumah and Arabia would be desolate forever. Damascus (Northern Israel) and Egypt would be restored once they cried out to God and built altars to Him.

God would discipline Israel, but with justice. God would forgive the remnant He preserved and bring them back to their own land. And He promised to never completely destroy them.

With the Oracles Isaiah is teaching us with prophetic eyes. He wants to give us a sense of God as we live in this world. Isaiah sees a redeeming God at work in a deeply troubled world. He wants us to see God, our cultural surroundings, and ourselves with realism. Then he gives us hope in the redeeming grace of God.

God wants us to look to Him. He is calling us to look away from the little world we have made to the One who made us. God is calling us to stop putting our hope in what we can do and start putting our hope in the divine Doer.

If you will suffer the loss of all things to gain Christ, He will make you too happy to care about what you give up. THAT is faith, and God is calling you to LIVE by that faith. Embrace Christ as your offering acceptable to God, and He will accept you without your own works or righteousness.

People made confident by the truth of God's sovereignty stand out amid the surrounding uproar. Their influence spreads faith to others, just as my dad's faith provided an example for me.

So how is Isaiah's vision relevant to us today? It answers a question that all Christians wrestle with. How should we as believers relate to the world and our cultural surroundings, whether it's in our home, our neighborhood, our work place, or politically in our nation and in the world? There are three basic possibilities.

- First, Christianity can be subordinated to culture. In other words, the world should tell Christians what enlightened people can believe, and the church should adjust to those views. But subjecting Christianity to the world denies the lordship of Christ, so that's not acceptable.
- Second, Christians can negate the world as a necessary evil, while they live in their own religious bubble. But that too denies the lordship of Christ. Withdrawal may feel safe, but it's escapism.
- Third is consecration. Instead of subordinating Christianity to culture, and instead of escaping from culture, **God wants us to consecrate all things to his glory.** God doesn't bow to the world. Neither does he run from the world. He redeems the world, because His glory shines the most brilliantly in his grace.

Ray Ortland in *Isaiah, God Saves Sinners* says it much better than I.

"In the Revelation of John, the apostle sees the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. The Prostitute will go out of business, and the Bride will come to her wedding day. Evil will be defeated and purity and joy will go into warp speed forever. This will be God's doing, not ours. It will come down to us. And as God dwells with us in the New Jerusalem, the Bible says that ...

... the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. (Rev 21:24-17)

Everyone has something to be ashamed of. But God is a Redeemer. He wants us

to become his pure bride in the New Jerusalem. The only thing is that we cannot retain our shame and hypocrisy. No unclean thing enters there. The shame that has defined us must be redeemed. Then our stories of despair can be lifted into his story of redemption. Every last petty sin can be redeemed into something beautiful for God.

The gospel gives us a reason to draw the curtain back, show God everything, and confess every detail. *We can also reveal our nakedness because we know God will clothe us with his Grace.* Let's trust him that much and open our hearts to his redemptive love. This is how he saves sinners. And how could it be otherwise? God redeems the dirty, the unwashed, the unworthy, *the naked*, and no one else! (*Italics mine*)

The shame and hypocrisy that control you lose their power as you open your heart to a redemption from beyond yourself."

Let's pray