

"Oracles"
Isaiah 17:1-21:17
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By now we're becoming more acquainted with the players in this era of the history of God's people. The big bully on the block is Assyria in the far north gobbling up country after country. They have invaded the Northern Kingdom of Israel (sometimes known as Ephraim) and squelched an alliance that Israel had with the Syrians, the Philistines, the Phoenicians, and the Arabs. Assyria was very much in an expansion mode during this time in history and would ultimately extend their empire until it included Egypt, Syria, Israel, Arabia and parts of Turkey and Persia. (That territory includes Babylon by the way.)

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had tried to bring Judah into the alliance, but strength in numbers wasn't the answer. We've already studied the spiritual climate of the times and the rampant dependence upon and involvement with idolatry. God's response was the judgment of deportation and a total dispersion of the nation of Israel. Assyria then imported people they had taken from other regions to join the small remnant of Israelites they had left in the land. Eventually, these people came to be called Samaritans.

Judah was in trouble – they were only buying time by paying high tribute to Assyria. Maybe Egypt and Cush (also known as Ethiopia) from the south would help – or Babylon to the east. But Isaiah's oracles in today's lesson show us that Egypt was going to have its own internal problems and Babylon would fall to the Assyrians. It was a sad message Isaiah had to bring.

The only bright spot in today's lesson is the prophecy of a time in the future millennial kingdom (chapter 19:18-25) when Egypt will acknowledge the Lord and there will be an open highway running from Egypt to Assyria that unites the peoples of the north and south under the leadership of the Messiah.

Royce did a wonderful job last week of getting us to think about idols and pride. Certainly, pride is a recurring theme when we're in the midst of judgment prophecies.

Sometimes it's easy to get lost in the trees of verse-by-verse study and lose sight of the forest. So, I took a step back to take a longer view of what we might learn from this Scripture. I want to draw your attention to thinking about these three thoughts: 1) the wrath of God 2) the word of God and 3) the will of God.

The wrath of God is greatly misunderstood by many people. Many think He's some sort of peeved deity, a kind of cosmic, terrible-tempered Mr. Bang, who indulges in violent and uncontrolled displays of temper when we humans don't do what we ought to do. The Bible never deals with the wrath of God that way.

According to Scriptures, the wrath of God is God's moral integrity. When man refuses to yield himself (that's pride) to God, he creates certain conditions (not only for himself but for others as well), which God has ordained for harm. Sin has consequences. It is God who makes evil result in sorrow, heartache, injustice and despair. It is God's way of saying to man, "Look, you must face the truth. You were made for Me. If you, in the dignity of human choice that I have given you, decide you don't want Me, I will leave. But you have to bear the consequences." The absence of God is destructive to human life. That absence brings God's wrath and He cannot withhold it. In His moral integrity, God decrees that evil things should occur as a result of man's prideful choices.

Man's sin and God's wrath are set within the same frame. Every now and again someone will ask the question, "Why doesn't God kill the devil? If it's the devil causing all this, why doesn't God get rid of him?" That same question appears concerning human beings. "Why didn't God kill Hitler? Look at all the terrible things he did." It might be easy to ask such a question, but then we should also ask, "Why didn't God paralyze my hand when I filled out my income tax and put down a wrong figure?" We should ask, "Why didn't God strike me dumb when I yelled at my spouse or my children?" Or "Why didn't He paralyze my tongue when I repeated that gossip or told that little white lie to make myself look better?"

If God is going to deal with sin, He must deal with it in everyone, not just the Hitlers, and not only in its extreme forms. The fact is that God allows His wrath, His moral integrity against sin, to be manifest precisely because it affords Him opportunity to display His love.

Perhaps because we have a nature that wants to grade our sins – gossip or lying isn't nearly as bad as adultery or murder – we also want to make a distinction between anger and wrath. Anger is for the little sins and wrath is for the big sins. God's moral integrity says sin is sin.

We know, living on this side of the cross, that God's wrath against the **fact** of sin (the depravity of mankind) was poured out on the Lord Jesus on the cross. That wrath gave us the single most significant display of His love that the world has ever seen. Jesus' blood atonement paid for all our sins – past, present and future – for those who would, by faith, believe in Him and claim Him as their Savior from sin. 1 Thessalonians 1:9 tells us "He delivers us from wrath to come." 1 John 4:17-18 "Perfect love casts out fear." As a believer we have no reason to fear punishment or facing a judgment when it comes to our eternal security and assurance of salvation.

When the **act** of sin (not the fact of sin) occurs (and it will as long as we have bodies of flesh), we can expect God to stay consistent with His moral integrity and cause us to suffer the consequences sinful behavior brings. The more rebellious the

spirit, the harsher God's wrath seems. God's hand is only as heavy as it needs to be. Chastisement and discipline are a part of love.

We take a look at God's wrath poured out on Damascus in chapter 17 this week – they'll be "a heap of ruins – deserted" and yet His love leaves a remnant . . . some gleanings remain, "two or three olives on the topmost branches – four or five on the fruitful boughs." And what happens? "In that day men will look to their Maker and turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel. They will not look to the altars, the work of their hands, and they will have no regard for the Asherah poles and the incense altars their fingers have made."

Amazing how adversity can change our perspective and get us back to the right focus. Listen to this story:

A young and very successful executive was traveling down a neighborhood street. He was going a bit too fast in his new Jaguar. He was watching for kids darting out from between parked cars and slowed down when he thought he saw something. As his car passed and no children appeared, instead, a brick smashed into the Jag's side door! He slammed on the brakes, spun the Jag back to the spot from where the brick had been thrown. He jumped out of the car, grabbed some kid and pushed him up against a parked car, shouting, "What was that all about and who are you? Just what the heck do you think you're doing?"

Building up a head of steam, he went on, "That's a new car and that brick you threw is going to cost you plenty of money. Why did you do it?"

"Please, Mister, please – I'm sorry! I didn't know what else to do" pleaded the youngster. "I threw the brick because no one else would stop." Tears were dripping down the boy's chin as he pointed around the parked car. "It's my brother," he said. "He rolled off the cub and fell out of his wheelchair and I can't lift him up." Sobbing the boy asked the executive, "Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair? He's hurt and he's too heavy for me."

Moved beyond words, the driver tried desperately to swallow the rapidly swelling lump in his throat. Straining, he lifted the young man back into the wheelchair and took out his handkerchief and wiped the scrapes and cuts, checking to see that everything was going to be okay.

"Thank you, sir! God bless you!" He then watched the boy push his brother down the sidewalk toward their home. It was a long walk back to the Jaguar, a long and slow walk. He never did repair the side door. He kept the dent to remind him not to go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention.

Life whispers in your soul and speaks in your heart. Sometimes, when you don't have time to listen . . . life throws a brick at your head. It's your choice: Listen to the whispers of your soul or wait for the brick to hit your head.

The wrath of God is powerful, but it's power under control. It has a purpose – to bring repentance, to demonstrate God's moral integrity, to afflict those comfortable in sin and comfort the afflicted with hope that comes from the knowledge that God is still in control of men and nations.

What we're studying, of course, is more of God's wrath on a national scale. We might ask the question, "Is God fair?" I think that's where we might turn our attention to the Word of God that I want to talk about next.

This was not an easy message for Isaiah to bring. No one likes to be the one to break bad news. We are studying a series of oracles in chapters 13-23 . . . descriptions of what will happen to various towns, cities, countries and even people as they suffer God's wrath. Would judgment be fair if they were never warned? Don't we raise our children with warnings? "Don't do this or that or you will be punished." Our society, our government has laws to follow that spell out the black and white, so to speak, of what behavior will bring punishment. From the time Moses brought down the Ten Commandments, the written word of God has spelled out right and wrong. From the time John finished writing the book of Revelation, the whole counsel of God has been made known.

Will people have a right to say God's unfair when the Great Tribulation comes upon the earth? No, of course not. We've been warned, but have we listened? We've been shown not only what is to come in judgment (we studied that a lot in the book of Revelation), but also God's Word tells us how to avoid it. Like Isaiah's charge in the memory verse, "You have forgotten God your Savior; you have not remembered the Rock, your fortress." That was true then, it's true for so many today.

Isaiah warned his people, a day is coming when instead of fruitful harvest, there will only be a harvest of disease and pain. Cush and Egypt and Babylon are not the source of relief or escape from your enemies – they will be left to the birds of prey and the wild animals, they will have civil war, a lost economy, a coward's heart. And Arabia – you have exactly one year before the pomp of Kedar will come to an end.

Do you see the grace of God in that? Wouldn't you think that forewarned is forearmed? Shouldn't they be looking to God instead of their neighbors! Sound the alarm! These are nations in trouble! But unrepentant nations – prideful nations don't take God seriously. The last verse of our lesson today (21:17) "The Lord, the God of Israel, has spoken."

We can learn a lot from the experiences of others whether it's reading about cultures of another time or observing how others react to the circumstances of life. We know that trusting in the work of our hands brings no security; people can disappoint us; pride brings a fall, rebellion against God brings disaster, that repentance brings mercy and forgiveness. You are here because you love the Word of God. You want to know not only how He's dealt with stubborn, prideful mankind in the past, and what He has planned for the future, but you want to know what God's will is for your life today.

Well, I don't want to disappoint you, but this isn't going to be an exposition on "How to know God's will for your life." Your local Christian bookstore has many books that address this subject in depth.

What I want to share is what I observed from Isaiah 20:3-4. That Scripture said, "Then the Lord said, 'Just as My servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush, so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old, with buttocks bared – to Egypt's shame.'"

God's will for Isaiah was to publicly humiliate himself by wearing the clothes of a slave (a loincloth) and no shoes. Not just a day, a week or a year . . . but three years! We told you that Isaiah is called the "Prince of Prophets." He ministered before the court and kings. They, however, were being counseled to ally themselves with Egypt and Cush and didn't want to hear what Isaiah had to say. So, for three long years Isaiah obeyed the Lord's direction and let his actions do his preaching. Don't you think he got noticed . . . got some attention? People were no doubt saying, "Have you seen that crazy old prophet, Isaiah?" How about his family? Remember he had two sons. Bet they were thrilled to say, "Yeah, I'm Isaiah's kid."

But Isaiah listened when God spoke. He obeyed when God said do it this way. We can be positive about one thing . . . it is always God's will for our lives that we be obedient to Him. When we make a vow, when we understand from Scripture what He wants us to do, when we've heard the Holy Spirit's voice as we've prayed . . . God expects us to be obedient.

Maybe you've always been the bold witness like Isaiah; right up front and in the face of everyone who'll listen. But God may tell you, "Stop being a Bible thumper. Let your life, let your attitude, let your acts of compassion, let your pocketbook witness about Me."

For some He might prompt your spirit to speak up! Deeds speak loudly, but "faith comes by hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ." He may have been preparing the heart of that person in front of you and brought the two of you together . . . now will you be too bashful – to reluctant to offend, to proclaim the Good News of the gospel with boldness? Why have you been

sitting in Bible study all these years? We speak when we have opportunity, we live a life of service that identifies us as Christians, and we delight to obey our Heavenly Father.

It's been a long time since we've sung the old hymn that is familiar to so many of us titled "Trust and Obey." Remember the words?

When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word what a glory He sheds on our way! While we do His good will He abides with us still, and with all who will trust and obey. Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.

The people of Isaiah's day probably thought that he was odd. A. W. Tozer has made this observation about you in his book *The Root of the Righteous*. "A real Christian is an odd number anyway. He feels supreme love for One whom he has never seen, talks personally every day to Someone he cannot see, expects to go to heaven on the virtue of Another, empties himself in order to be full, admits he is wrong so he can be declared right, goes down in order to get up, is strongest when he is weakest, richest when he is poorest, and happiest when he feels worst. He dies so he can live, forsakes in order to have, gives away so he can keep, sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, and has peace that surpasses all understanding."

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 truly pray that as we celebrated the Thanksgiving holiday, each one of us counted our many blessing – named them one by one – and especially thanked Him for making His Word such a vital and rich blessing in our life.