

Commentary on Isaiah

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Introduction to Isaiah

Likely born into the royal family, Isaiah represents the epitome of Hebrew literature during the Monarchy and Divided Kingdom Periods. He appears first as Court Secretary of King Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:22). While we cannot ascertain when his service began, we know that Uzziah died in 740 BC. Afterward, Isaiah may have performed other services in the royal court, but was known as the chief prophet to the King of Judah. Tradition says he was executed by Manasseh, yet it would seem he would not have taken that step until his co-regency with his father Hezekiah ended at the latter's death in 687 BC. Thus, at a minimum, we can see his ministry lasting 53 years and probably closer to 60.

His service put him in a unique place among the prophets, for he could not avoid knowing the business of kings and nations. His ministry followed the Southern Kingdom from near its highest point under Uzziah, down through deep troubles under Ahaz. Suffering tremendous losses from external forces – chiefly Assyria – we could say Jerusalem was about as much as the king controlled at one point. Isaiah watched Assyria destroy Samaria and carry the Northern Kingdom away to exile in 722 BC. Eventually, Hezekiah regained much of what was lost, but handed it to his notorious son, whose awful sins brought down on the nation the final destruction by Babylon.

Indeed, Babylon sent emissaries to Jerusalem during Isaiah's service and he prophesied that they would destroy the kingdom. The nature of his prophetic ministry was to relay to the nation God's accusations of unfaithfulness. The first five chapters take the literary form of a charge read in a court of law. Woven through the following 34 chapters are the prophecies and events Isaiah saw himself. The last 27 chapters are a grand prophecy of things to come, Messianic prophecies in particular, but include images of what would come during the Babylonian Captivity. His grasp of culture, history and Hebrew language remains the best example of high literary achievement for that part of Hebrew History. The impact of his work is seen in numerous quotations, particularly in the New Testament, not least the many times Christ quoted him. Beyond mere quotations, the influence of his prophetic message is huge.

As the quintessential expression of Hebrew thought and writing, we find Isaiah pays little attention to strict chronology unless it forms the major point of what must be said. We do well to allow Isaiah to show us what it means to think Hebrew, to absorb it simply, rather than attempt to use any Western analytical skills to abstract principles. Isaiah himself would probably denounce any such analysis, as we shall see.

Chapter 1

Dawdling rapturously over every detail of Isaiah's imagery would be too easy. It is so rich and full of symbolism that we could burn through whole days squeezing all the juice from any one chapter. Too many good commentaries do that far better than we could here. Our aim is to gain an overview, to become biblically literate in the wide view so that details make more sense.

In this first chapter, Isaiah lays out the essential charge against Israel. As a nation, she stands under a covenant with Jehovah. That covenant was entered freely, as a gift from God. He was

the one who invested so very much into it, bore the entire risk and kept it vital and living through the centuries. He carried Israel into Canaan Land, and then safely hid her in Egypt while He weakened those living in Canaan with devastating famine. He destroyed the nation that held them in slavery, enriching Israel at Pharaoh's expense. He even went the extra mile by carefully pointing out that the entire Egyptian pantheon was subject to His will. Where was their pride in Him as the God over all other gods? He fed them while marching them through the desert where far smaller groups had died of starvation. They grew fat. He kept their enemies weak enough for Israel to destroy at every encounter. Then, having shown them His intent and the abundance of care He was prepared to lavish on them, He asked them simply to say they would accept His covenant.

They did accept it, and then promptly reneged. He kept calling them back; kept laying out huge costs to go and win them back and they kept running away. All Creation could recognize the injustice of this. What child ever failed to love his parents? What stupid ox or donkey ever turned on the one who fed it? Thus acted the child-ox-donkey named Israel.

In Hebrew culture, the heart was the seat of the will commitment. It makes no difference what you claim to be, or what you are in your inner being. What matters most is what you decide to do, where your commitments lead you. You might well fail, but if your heart is determined to do the right thing, nothing else matters in God's eyes. Israel's heart was sick, completely untrustworthy and their minds were so twisted that they could hardly see what was right and wrong in the first place. To spank their bodies was pointless, because God had hit them all over. Not once did they turn to Him for healing, but kept turning away.

For that reason, heathen invaders were eating their crops. At harvest time, enemies simply moved in and devoured whatever Israel had labored through the growing season to produce. About the only safe place was the actual city of Jerusalem. Only because the Lord intended yet again to revive the nation did He not bother to crush them under volcanic ash as He had Sodom and Gomorrah. So now there was a new Sodom and Gomorrah, for the last city of refuge where the Temple stood was no less sinful than those unspeakable cities. All their ritual observances meant nothing – indeed, were offensive. For what reason did they dirty the Temple carpets with their feet? It certainly was not to seek God's face. They were unfit to enter His presence, having never bothered so much as to take a bath.

God called them to stand before His judgment, but not for condemnation. Let them come and simply acknowledge their sins and He would be quick to forgive, to cleanse, and to restore all they once had. Should they continue to reject His judgment, they deserved what happened to wives who became harlots. Brazen in their sins, their best and brightest were moral sewers. They remained proud as they smeared themselves with feces. Has anyone ever seen such a grand perversion? They had no concept of what "good" and "just" meant.

Still, God cannot forsake His own. So, He will simply do it all Himself. Whether they like it or not, Israel will be dragged kicking and screaming back into righteousness, even at the cost of everything they had. Those among the nobles and priests leading the nation astray would be removed. People who understood God's ways would replace them. If necessary, the whole nation could be replaced with one that served Him. He would remove all those who promoted

and funded pagan idolatry, along with their shrines. The lush glades of pagan idolatry would be dried up and blown away and the tree trunks burned into the ground, as would the lives of those who lavished so much work and money on them.

The Lord lays out His charges and begins making His case before the watching world, before the whole of Creation. He calls on the entire universe to realize that the one most privileged element of Creation was also the most rebellious and undeserving.

Chapter 2

In the symbolic logic of Hebrew language and culture, which is the fundamental viewpoint of Scripture, there is no one-to-one relationship between symbols and things symbolized. That would be mere typology or allegory, common to Western cultures. Rather, the spiritual logic of Scripture is far more flexible, something with which we are often uncomfortable. Yet this is not to say you can make of Isaiah's words willy-nilly what you wish to see, but that you can't put a straight jacket around truth and confine it to boundaries of mere human logic. Insofar as we cannot confine God to our limited understanding, so His truth is somewhat above simple rational definition.

The first paragraph in this chapter cannot be taken literally. That would be committing us to the basic error of Judaism, the Hellenized corruption of Hebrew faith and religion. False Messianic Expectations grew from literal renderings of this passage. Rather, Isaiah sees a vision of God's Kingdom as He wanted to make it, a reality from above. As such, symbolic visions as parables are the only way to convey the content. The Nation of Israel was never meant to hoard the revelation of God to themselves, but to share it with all nations. They failed this miserably, replacing an evangelistic zeal with racism and smug superiority. Judaism saw in this passage the promise all the world of Gentiles would willingly become slaves of Israel.

In the broader context of Scripture, within a pure Hebraic culture, we find the obvious original plan of God was to make Himself known to His entire Creation. This is not simply some vision of a future Millennium; that is also too literal. Rather, this indicates how God thinks and acts. Such truth will, indeed, find a manifestation within this world, but we can hardly imagine how it would look. Rather, we are called to a higher place, not the mere pedestrian list of features, but something much greater. His revelation will take prominence in the entire world. Nothing else will matter by comparison. No race or ethnic group can resist the call of truth, but the Kingdom of Heaven will be drawn from the full range of humanity. Their whole focus in life will be more and better understanding of God's ways. People who once served as weapons of human governments will become implements for the harvest of souls and spiritual fruit. In His presence, violence has no place. Isaiah pointedly invites his nation to participate, to commit themselves now, before it's too late.

God has forsaken Israel already. They have bought into the silly magic of the East. They are infatuated with exotic women. Everybody chases worldly wealth and military might. They bow down to things that they have made with their own hands. God rightly does not forgive such foolishness. When judgment comes, there will be no place to hide. Offering a glimpse of the peculiar Hebraic sense of humor, Isaiah notes they have spent so long trumpeting their worldly

greatness from the tops of the mountains that they won't be able to find a way down to hide from God's wrath. They'll still be stuck on top, exposed to the fullness of His fury. They've usurped His throne and will be crushed when He comes to take His seat.

The fleshly way of things, admiring tall trees, trusting in oak beams and fortresses unapproachable, or ships fitted to cross open seas (instead of hugging the shore as most sailors did) – everything man believes really matters will be nothing. Human reckoning invariably gets things backward. By the time Israel figures this out, it will be too late. Their faces will redden with shame as they try to hide their idols. There will be no place to hide. It would be better for such people if God simply ignored them and destroyed them along with the fallen world.

Chapter 3

Sometimes our greatest difficulty in understanding the best of ancient Hebrew literature is the relative lack of equivalence in cultural imagery. Some things are pretty easy to grasp. For example, would you want to be ruled by petulant children? Other things are much more subtle, difficult to translate into our modern Western society. We lack the symbolic logic so necessary to grasp the impact of the imagery. As Isaiah continues his list of penalties for rejecting God's ways, we find ourselves in a mixture of literal and symbolic warnings, with no clear boundaries at times between them. Some sections of the narrative are both symbolic and literal at the same time.

The very God of Creation will act to judge. There will come a time when the entire nation will find their food supply confiscated. It is impossible to overstate the seriousness of such a threat. Worse, He will remove from the nation everyone that matters at all. The list of important national leaders ends with a disconcerting reminder that symbolizes why this will happen. The whole laundry list of who's who will be taken along with the pagan conjurers who seem to have made a very good living as respectable professionals. Isaiah uses terms that are somewhat ambiguous because the leaders of Judah can no longer tell the difference between honest advisers and snake charmers. To some degree, this came true literally when Babylon exiled the cream of society.

That children should replace these social and political leaders is not quite so literal. Rather, they would foolishly cling to rulers who were childish, immature idiots. Worse, the implication is that Judah will call them good men, not knowing the difference. They will no longer understand virtue and will mistake tyranny and harsh treatment for being socially responsible. The natural endpoint of such a trend is the nit-picking busybodies called Pharisees who essentially ruled society in Jesus' day. The Hellenized corruption of Hebrew religion called "Judaism" was so taken with externals, there was but a thin veneer of lip service paid to deeper moral concerns. Judaism, as a departure from genuine ancient faith, was a religion designed by immature brats who have zero respect for Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) mystical depth.

It would become so bad, so utterly chaotic, that it's hard to imagine. Picture it in terms of a land devoid of any real nobility. In those days, it was the norm to find several generations of extended family living inside the same walls, where the extended household was the fundamental unit of social structure. The nation will be so lost and completely bereft of social

stability and leadership that any household where such a family remains intact will be the *de facto* nobility. Should they be reduced to awnings attached to ruins, they would be petty kings. So any group of brothers who finds among them one who can afford more than the basic tunic and pants, actually owning a cloak, he'll qualify to rule. This was in a world where the public badge of importance was wearing a long outer garment unsuitable for working men. A man would wear a long and expensive robe to prove he didn't have to work for a living. Yet, here we have a man with something even poor men usually could afford – the standard, all-purpose cloak, little more than a blanket with sleeves, virtually necessary to survive in that part of the world. Things would get so bad that such a man would be distinguished as nobility, even though he lacked the basic supplies you might find in even the poorest cottage. The ruling class typically kept an emergency food supply for those who lived in their area, along with what served as first aid supplies.

Isaiah compares the elite of the capitol city with the rulers of Sodom, who advertised their filthy sexual practices as a prominent feature, as if it were in their favor, an attraction drawing new residents. "Come to Sodom, where nothing is a sin!" The civic leaders in Judah didn't even have the sense to keep silent about their wretched practices, but considered them worthy of boasting. God says, "Fine; you will reap what you sow." The righteous will do well, but the wicked will harvest evil against themselves. They preferred the counsel of brats and schoolgirls to show them the paths of wisdom.

Rather bluntly, Isaiah points the finger at the leaders of Judah for a complete lack of even the most primitive level of justice. Instead of taking the rent portion from a vineyard, they eat the whole vineyard. They steal from the poor to fund their wealthy lifestyles. Did they not know it was like grinding God's own face in the dirt? God did not place leaders over the peasants so they could enslave the population of their lands. Those were *His* people. This level of arrogance showed itself all over the place.

Women had completely forgotten the old ways. While our modern social mythology finds it demeaning that women were expected to avoid drawing attention to themselves, that was the cultural expectation for God's People and remains the best means of restraining sexual promiscuity. Honorable women avoided eye contact with any non-family male unless they had important business with him. The women of Jerusalem openly flirted with any man that caught their eye. Instead of modest clothing, they dressed like show girls on a Vegas stage. So very close to being prostitutes, this is the same underlying moral flaw of justice for sale. Whether men or women, the big shots in Jerusalem manifested their complete rejection of God's ways. Because they focused on the adoration of other humans, God would make them utterly detestable. Just like stripping a hooker of her wealth and finery, shaving her head and infesting her with odious, smelly diseases, the same sort of thing would come on the men leading the nation. The whole people had prostituted themselves to other gods.

In a sense, anyone who saw all this horrendous behavior through God's eyes would react the same as they would to being accosted by a prostitute with no hair, ragged clothing, smelling worse than a sewer and appearing leprous. For all this, the leaders of Judah were just so proud of themselves.

Chapter 4

There is a certain ambiguity in the phrase translated, "in that day." As with all Hebrew writing, context is everything. At its root, the phrase refers to the Day of Lord in the generic sense of God acting in judgment and wrath. However, it is clearly understood that when sin is punished, righteousness flourishes. Where sinners are destroyed, the righteous reign. Thus, we see either aspect emphasized in different places. Each instance is at least symbolic of that Final Day of the Lord, when we would properly write it, "That Day." For those who walk in faith, any "that day" is a good thing, regardless of the sorrow it might bring on this earth, for a taste of Heaven has surely come down.

Isaiah makes a distinct connection between both senses of the phrase by first associating it with the wrath that he has been describing already. When the judging hand of Jehovah falls on Israel in her sin, the result will be devastation. So many men would be killed in battle that there would be widows aplenty begging to marry any man. Never mind whether he was able to support them; they would gladly take care of themselves independently, if only they could bear the name of a living man. A surviving male could have his pick of women, but would be too busy just trying to eke out a bare living to think about enjoying such a thing.

However, we note there will be some survivors. Isaiah explores who they might be, by offering the same phrase again – "in that day." Those few who are left in Israel will form a sprout from the root of what Israel was meant to be. The term "Branch" refers to the Messiah, the surviving branch of the House of David. Isaiah is intentionally ambiguous here, because of the fundamental spiritual principle: The Lord will not allow His witness to die, even if He has to destroy Israel. In a certain sense, he lays here the foundation for the image of Jesus *as* Israel, in the sense of Israel-the-mission instead of Israel-the-nation. After He comes, being "Israel" will mean being in Christ. Not in the sense of a silly Replacement Theology model, but in a mystical sense – what Israel was meant to accomplish. Israel existed solely to reveal God, to be a kingdom of priests to bridge the gap between God and fallen man. Israel rejected that role repeatedly, ending up fiercely racist and rejoicing in the notion that Gentiles would go to Hell. That nation could not survive, because they were dead outside the purpose for which God called them.

The Nation of Israel physically carried off to Babylon was simply the manifestation of the moral principle that they had long since allowed sin to carry them away from their redemptive purpose. The bare few of Israel-the-nation who did not join in that rush to sin would form a tiny sprout, growing into a living tree of grace, an olive tree bearing the oil of the Holy Spirit to light the lamp of witness to the world. God would remove the mass of diseased growth. Those left behind in the land, typically those so unimportant that they served no purpose for the Babylonian conquerors, would be the ones in a proper position to become the New Israel. It matters not at all their DNA, but the image is of a people who know they have nothing, are nothing and fall at the feet of God Almighty.

All the sinners, who were so sure of their importance in the world, would be gone. That tiny remnant of true believers would once again bring life back to Jerusalem. Zion becomes a symbol, because of what Zion ought to have been. She had been the city of urbane and

pretentious fools, of blood, oppression and unrestrained sexual impurity. She would become the City of Light, of holiness and devotion to something far above this world. It would be as if tents strung among the ruin and rubble would be the new dwelling places of God, where His presence could be seen as a Pillar of Cloud by day and Pillar of Fire by night. What could more clearly exemplify the hearts of individuals who have cast aside all the cares and concerns of this world and live simply in purity of commitment to God? There would no longer be one physical Temple of God on earth, but His presence in a few hardy souls.

Chapter 5

In these first five chapters, God called His People through Isaiah to account for their sins. Jehovah delivers His verdict against Israel and Judah. Standing like any servant before a king, lacking any word of defense, there is left only a consideration of the penalty.

Keep in mind, any nation could have found the favor of God by applying their best understanding of the Covenant of Noah. Going the extra mile with Israel, the Lord delivered a fully explicated suzerain treaty to His vassal nation. In extravagant detail, He laid out a specific application of Noah through Moses. It was fully consistent with already established cultural practices of these people and included generous allowances for restoring the covenant when things simply didn't work out right.

The purpose was to permit Him to show what He required of all nations. Had Israel done half the job, she would have first understood how the Covenant pointed to a higher spiritual reality. Then she would have offered the same to all mankind. Not only did Israel herself quickly lose sight of that eternal spiritual truth, but could not even bring herself to obey well enough to reap the worldly benefits available to all humanity.

The indictment against the nation begins with the Parable of the Vineyard. After all God had done to make her fruitful, Israel refused to produce even the pitiful fruit of human success. What would any man do to a literal vineyard in such a case? He would cease investing resources and return the plot of land to its natural state, for it is rightly wilderness land, unworthy of cultivation. Israel was a spiritual wilderness, as well as a civil and social wilderness. Just to ensure no one misses it, Isaiah points the finger of accusation at the whole nation of Israel: "You are the pampered vineyard which brought no useful fruit!"

We can identify six points of failure noted in this sentence.

First, there is the greed that destroys the community. It's one thing to pile up gold and other portable possessions. It harms no one if you prosper in that fashion. When you turn your prosperity into a weapon to dispossess families from the source of maintaining life on the earth, you condemn them unjustly to dependency at best and starvation at worst. Using financial and legal leverage to amass power is, by definition, sin. In this case, it is the power to exclude others from any hope of surviving, much less prospering as God had planned. Further, it creates a barrier between a small elite landowner class treading down a nation of peasants. This breaks the Covenant of Moses at a fundamental level, destroying social stability. For this, they can expect all their land to offer a reverse yield of roughly one for ten and their mansions will stand empty of heirs.

Second, the life of dissipation as a result of inordinate wealth. Since wine was a major product and recommended by God, it's hardly the drinking that is sinful, but the manner and context. These people don't work as God had intended for all men, but fritter the time away in partying. Not simply avoiding sweaty work, these folks do no work at all. They party all day and night. Scholars, singers, bookkeepers, managers, as well as farmers and herders all work, doing something that engages their time and produces a benefit to the community. Isaiah points out that they do none of these things. They bless no one by how they pass their time and this is not how God planned human life to be.

Isaiah then takes a moment to describe the result of this party-hearty lifestyle. The whole nation is enslaved to such frivolous entertainment and is pitifully ignorant of truth. The few who are wise and honorable starve to death, while the core of leaders and teachers that give this nation character and renown are all gone. These partiers are prancing away into death. Whatever else happens, this horror will end if God has to crush it Himself. He would rather see the land of Canaan managed under foreign domination than to see any more of this.

Third, the nation's social leaders mock the old ways. They have harnessed themselves to evil as if it were some new fashion. They dare to suggest that if God cares He can defend Himself. The implication is that God isn't keeping up with the times and needs to offer a fresh revelation. They suggest He is not diligent enough to enforce His commands. If what they are doing is wrong, what's taking Him so long to react? They suggest His patience is a lack of interest.

Fourth, these same leaders have seized upon some new fashion in human philosophy. It became their excuse for turning things upside down, for rejecting God's standards. They were wholly convinced of their intelligence. Connected with this was a fifth: Human standards of wisdom dreamed up by fallen human intelligence. They had complete disregard for revealed truth and were enamored with their own mental gymnastics.

Sixth, standards of justice and just good plain sense had disappeared. The social leaders were so proud of their skills with wine and cuisine, but had no clue about standing up for what is right. Thus, justice was for sale. Evil men bought their way out of trouble, while honest men went to prison.

Having strayed so far away from God's path for them, they left themselves wide open to wrath. Only in obedience could they expect peace and safety. Instead, they had chosen self and sin as their gods. Thus, it was a natural result that Creation itself would turn against them. What was rotten would not persist. But there's more, for they have simply gone too far.

The sentence against them was a massive invasion. God would set forth an invitation to some far distant rulers. Further, the protection and prosperity He wanted to give Israel would be reserved for her enemies. These advancing armies would be swift as the wind, not tiring at all on their long march. They would arrive as sharp, clean and battle ready as they left – even stronger, if possible. Nothing would wear out, echoing the blessings of the Exodus, which Israel reaped even during their 40 Years of Wandering.

Rather than the roaring of toothless old lions driving the prey to the young lions, these invaders would be the young lions, seizing their prey without warning. In the middle of the battle, they

would remain comfortable and safe, as God would ensure their victory. Israel would find herself driven to the sea, with no escape; even the weather would be against them.

Note that these are largely symbolic, but represented the very real earthly blessings Israel could have had against her enemies. All it took was simple adherence, and a rather easy level of acceptance, at that. Other nations did not have this advantage, but we note Isaiah says Israel simply threw it all away.

Chapter 6

We begin in chapter 6 the second section of Isaiah's published work. It is a mixture of prophetic material given to us within a historical context. He tells the story of Israel's decline toward the sentence already revealed in the courtroom scene of the first five chapters, the courtroom of an Eastern potentate who is Lawgiver, Ruler and Judge. The offense of Israel and Judah is personal, a failure of a covenant relationship and a violation of sacred trust.

King Uzziah was also called Azariah. It gets a little confusing because the High Priest who opposed the king when the latter attempted to burn incense in the Temple (2 Chronicles 26:16ff) is also named Azariah. This foolish act brought wrath from God in the form of leprosy, spreading downward from the forehead of Uzziah. Naturally, this disease required him to be isolated and his son Jotham acted as co-regent. The incident came late in Uzziah's reign, a failure at the climax of a long reign great in prosperity, defense technology improvements and fame. He reaped the blessings of obedience to the Covenant until those last few months. While his son was also faithful, the people had begun to rebel against God. Uzziah died around 740-739 BC.

Having grown up in the royal household during the heyday of Uzziah's greatness, Isaiah had already begun his ministry as prophet. Hardly had his feet been established on that path, but Uzziah does this crazy thing with the incense, is driven out of the Temple and takes up an internal exile, isolated in a separate house. He died in shame. How bitter the end must have been for Isaiah to see such a plummet from the heights of fame and power. Was holiness so fragile? As he prays in the Temple, Isaiah receives answers to His deepest questions.

He finds himself transported in a vision into the very throne room of God Almighty. From the symbolic earthly structure to the real thing in Heaven, Isaiah can scarcely describe what he saw. The image is not meant to portray a factual description, but Isaiah points out the hallmarks of what should seize upon every man who finds himself in such a place. It is the extremity of everything which men in that time associated with greatness and power. If a king gets to wear long robes totally impractical for manual labor, God wears one so long it spreads across the entire floor. If most kings get servants hovering with fans around their thrones, God has winged angelic creatures fanning His. If men wear robes and shoes to cover their feet in respect before kings, God has seraphim covering their feet with wings. If men who serve kings respectfully avert their eyes downward in the presence of kings, God's angels cover their faces with more wings. And so it goes, producing the image of power and holiness beyond all human comprehension.

Indeed, holiness was the primary refrain from these hovering seraphim. So great were God's throne comforters, their very cries shook the structure that housed the scene. The presence of smoke reminds us of Eastern prayer rituals using incense. In the midst of this, Isaiah notes he is struck dumb. This angelic choir sings rapturously of God's holiness, but Isaiah is unfit even to say it. Any man of faith, moved by the Spirit of God, maintains in the forefront of his consciousness a sense of unworthiness before the Lord. This is the primary mark of the Spirit's presence in a human soul. Isaiah had seen unworthiness in the mirror of his own soul and a whole nation of filthiness around him. None were fit to declare His holiness.

The word *seraph* (plural *seraphim*) comes from the root word for "glowing" – their mere existence as holy creatures of God causes them to luminescence. In the ANE, light was always associated with fire and it is this fiery glowing creature who has no trouble taking in his hand a coal from the Altar of Sacrifice in Heaven's Court, though he used tongs to select it. Symbolically, confessed sin is exposed to the cleansing power of blood sacrifice and fire. Sins kept back from confession cannot be forgiven. By confessing the truth of his life, Isaiah stands in the place of God's mercy. He is cleansed by the coal of a sacrifice and made fit to speak of God's holiness. When the Lord calls for one to speak His message, Isaiah now has boldness to volunteer.

The Lord's message is hardly news to Isaiah, but serves as a warning to those who should receive it. The logic of this is their choice of sin; they shall have it. They have chosen to ignore God, so they shall be prevented from seeing and hearing Him. In Hebrew culture, the heart is the seat of the will, commitment and faith. A "fat heart" is one that is unresponsive, unable to jump at God's call. Having just presented the vision of God on His throne in Heaven, we should have already figured out that our place is sitting in the corner like any minor servant, quietly waiting to be called, at which point we come at a run and fall down before Him. It's not from fear we do this, but a sure knowledge there is no better life in this world. It's really all we could want. Isaiah points out the contrast from this with a nation that can't be bothered to even listen, much less obey.

Notice the very Eastern view of time here. Isaiah's question held nothing of an interest in hours and dates, but of what ripeness looks like. Isaiah would have expected such answer as he got: The Nation of Israel would remain foolish until they were brutally conquered, taken away, exiled to some distant place. The Hebrew conception of time is not as a thing to be measured, but a space between pivotal events. Don't ask what date a thing will come; ask what the sign will be. Until then, keep your mind on your assignment. So Isaiah would preach and prophesy until the march of Babylon.

Once the people are gone, their sentence served, only a tenth would return to this land. Even then, they will be targets for more wrath and destruction. Like a tree stump that keeps getting trimmed back every time it sprouts, Israel would never be what she once was, what she could have and should have been. However, there is a hint that in some far distant time, when the time is right, the tree would grow again, because it would remain alive in its stump.

The good times are past for Isaiah. As he mourns the loss of a glorious reign, a reign that ended disgracefully, all that is before him is the heavy burden of prophecy even while the people have

already begun the path of decline. Most difficult for him as a man is the sure knowledge that his service would not change the nation. From a human point of view, it would be a futile ministry. It remained nonetheless the thing to which God called him.

Chapter 7

As we read this chapter, we keep in mind the image of cattle and bees. Most of the time, “milk and honey” represent a life of plenty, almost luxury, because you also have everything else. More literally, it would be curdled milk, perhaps what we might call yogurt, eaten like a dessert with honey drizzled over it. God had promised before the Conquest that Canaan would be such a land of milk and honey. In Hebrew literature, exploring possible associations in novel ways offered a rich background of imagery.

The Northern Kingdom, referred to by the chief tribe Ephraim, had allied with Syria against the growing threat of Assyrian invasion. Judah refused to join the alliance. The rulers of Israel and Syria decided to attack Jerusalem and place a puppet ruler on the throne, to combine forces for a much larger army to oppose Assyria. We note that Edom was in on the deal, as well. King Ahaz of Judah disobeyed God and stripped the Temple and royal treasuries to send a bribe to Assyria to hasten their advance. In essence, Ahaz disobeyed God and trusted in human wisdom. We find him in about 735 BC, inspecting the water supply to the city as he prepares for the siege. The troops of Syria were already within marching distance, marshaling with the army of Ephraim. The Syrians would eventually take back the City of Elath and Israel would slaughter a very large chunk of Judah’s army, destroying some Judean cities in the process. However, Isaiah notes that this plan to grab the throne of David eventually failed, but this narrative takes place sometime earlier than those events.

Isaiah received a command from God to meet Ahaz at the pool out on the lower end of the ridge on which the most ancient part of Jerusalem was built, overlooking the place where the Hinnom and Kidron Valleys met. Isaiah is told to take his very young son with him, the one whose name (“A Remnant Shall Return”) reminds everyone that the entire nation was under judgment for failure to keep the Covenant of Moses, as noted in the previous chapters. He was likely still a young boy at this time and would help to visualize a part of the message. It’s important to remember that Ahaz was the sort of man to put *his* children through the fires of Molech in the ancient shrine there in that very same valley below, near the place where the launderers did their business.

The first order of business is to assure Ahaz he would not lose his throne. God had promised to maintain the House of David for as long as the kingdom lasted. These two kings directly to the north might do some damage as punishment against Judah’s sins, but weren’t really that dangerous. Rezin was just a man who held a throne no one seemed to keep very long. Ephraim was already marked out for utter destruction in some 65 years and the ruler was some guy whose father was never a member of the royal family – “bin Remaliah.” Indeed, God never mentions the name of Pekah, but refers to him as some nobody, son of nobody. Since Ahaz wasn’t much for obeying God either, his life could be snuffed out just as easily as these two, but the family of David would retain the throne.

Further, since Ahaz clearly lacked any confidence in Jehovah, perhaps he should propose a sign to test if He was real – anything he could imagine. What would it take to convince him? In false piety, Ahaz declined, perhaps citing Deuteronomy 6:16, but of course ignoring a couple of verses before that (14): “You shall not go after other gods.” As with Pekah, now Isaiah ceases calling Ahaz by name and addresses him merely by his family name. It was not enough for Ahaz to provoke two human kings to anger, but he had been provoking the King of Heaven for quite some time.

God would provide His own sign. Pointing out his young son, Isaiah told a parable regarding the boy’s age. Ahaz was asked to picture in his mind the boy’s mother as a virgin girl. She got married, conceived and had a son. She raised him during a time of plenty, when there was milk and honey. There was no threat to his life, neither from conditions of his childhood, nor from idolatry such as Ahaz practiced. No, this boy was dedicated to God, as Moses had commanded of every first-born male since the Passover that started the Exodus. Indeed, his mother gave him a name that meant, “God is with us.” By the time this boy has lived long enough that he could be expected to obey the Law – age 12 – it would be long enough for God to destroy both of the kings of Ephraim and Syria. Before Isaiah’s own son was 12, this had come true literally. Both Pekah and Rezin were killed in 732 BC when Assyria invaded.

However, this deliverance would hardly bring the sweetness of milk and honey. Comparing Egypt to the biting flies that might hang on the flanks of cows, and comparing Assyria to the bees that infested the untamed forests, the two would do battle not far away. In the process, both would strip Judah and Ephraim of food and conscript as combat support slaves any able-bodied men and women they could round up. Indicating Assyria would prevail in this clash, it would be the “barber of Assyria” whom Ahaz had hired, who would denude the land of everything that had value. In other terms, those who survive the ravages of Assyria would just about manage to keep a cow, or maybe some sheep to graze the once verdant farm fields. There wouldn’t be much else, but they would have plenty of milk for making curds and lots of honey from beehives infesting what were once fertile vineyards. Not the milk and honey of plenty, but the milk and honey of desperate people who have nothing else.

The sins of Ahaz, along with those of Judah who followed his lead deep into idolatry, would add to the account of sins of Judah. The warning had been too clear during Uzziah’s reign some time before. If that weren’t enough, the example of Ephraim would point out what happens when the nation abandons the Covenant of Moses. God would keep His promise to maintain the line of David on the throne, but without repentance, that throne would mean nothing, because Judah would be carried away into exile.

Chapter 8

After the warning to Ahaz, the Lord continues to operate in mercy according to His promise to King David. A short time later, the Lord directed Isaiah to write on an official document, witnessed before the High Priest and another ranking priest. On this scroll was the name *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz* – “Speed to spoil, hasten to prey.” Then, Isaiah impregnated his wife and a second son was born, named according to that document. The whole point was, before it

happened, there was a witnessed scroll and a child born to indicate the prophecy that Assyria would crush Damascus and Samaria, coming before the boy was three. No one could mistake this as anything other than God's doing.

However, this was hardly a cause for celebration over the deaths of Pekah and Rezin. Calling on Assyria for assistance was begging for a flood. Unlike the gentle trickle flowing out of the hillside just outside the Eastern Gate of Jerusalem, this flooding Euphrates, a symbol of Assyrian invasion, would all but wash away Jerusalem – reaching the neck, but not drowning the head of Judah. Isaiah pronounces this prophecy in the name of the coming Redeemer, Immanuel. Furthermore, every other nation in the area will be crushed along with Judah. Their fates would be worse, because they did not have a Messiah who must surely come. Thus, the only thing keeping what's left of Israel alive at all is the promise of the Messiah coming out of her, in spite of her.

Things had been completely turned upside down during Ahaz's reign. Because official policy was paganism, as well as negotiations with pagan nations, any attempt to stand for the Law drew hisses of "conspiracy, treason!" What does it say when the leaders in the city of Solomon's Temple thought it criminal to pray in that Temple for their national God's help – help which had never failed in the past? Isaiah was directed to be faithful in the face of this persecution. God could handle them just fine and in due time they would be led away in chains.

We aren't told what level of support Isaiah had in Jerusalem. Surely there must have been some who stood with him, providing an excuse to claim conspiracy against the king. Isaiah shows it clearly didn't matter if his household was alone in standing with God and teaching the Law to whomever would listen. Isaiah speaks of his two sons, the children whom God had given him, but they symbolize anyone who heard and remained faithful. Again, the number was surely substantial. At any rate, those two sons of Isaiah would, by the repetition of their names, present a nagging reminder of things the smug elites would rather forget.

It had become altogether fashionable to consult with the demon-possessed cult wizards and mediums. Indeed, we can envision an obsession by which the elite considered it a threat if anyone *didn't* consult the pagan soothsayers. Does Israel not have a God, Jehovah? Do they need to inquire of the gods of other nations? Does anyone suppose the dead can help the living? The Lord enunciates clearly the principle: If people do not speak of the Covenant, they are spiritually blind. The same God who promised this land, who made it prosper when they obeyed, will become the God of wrath in the eyes of the blind. Instead of promise, blessing and redemption, they will be able to see only hunger, anger, depression and fear. Because they will not look to God, they will be driven even farther into that darkness.

Chapter 9

We have the advantage of seeing the sweep of biblical history in hindsight. Not only did Isaiah likely have no idea when the Babylonian conquest would come, but he almost surely had no clues to the timing of Messiah. Yet, we must understand that he would hardly have cared to know such a thing. The only reason he makes much of the timing of Assyria's invasion and conquest of Damascus and Samaria was to show that God knows these things, but no one else

does. Even then, it wasn't scheduled down to the precise second. For the Hebrew mind of faith, it's enough to rest on God's knowing. Things not yet on the radar will come when the time is right, when God is ready. He's already made it clear that He does not operate on our sense of time.

God had chosen the region of Galilee to bear the brunt of Assyria's invasion. They were the first to embrace idolatry, particularly when half the Tribe of Dan settled there during the Period of Judges, setting up temples to pagan gods. This area was the first to see destruction and feel the wrath of God. By the same token, the redemption of the Lord will begin in the same place, for it is here that the Messiah will do His first miracles. In ancient times, the captured war materiel of the enemy was burned as a victory thank offering to the gods. Recalling the glorious victory of Gideon and his 300 men over the entire army of Midian, the Messiah would conquer the hearts of men from all nations, attaching them to the final covenant of grace on the earth, as the final offering in which human failure as a whole would be burned in a victory celebration. What Israel had been called to do – to be a bonfire signal to the whole world – would be fulfilled in Christ.

Isaiah draws all the symbolic connections to the identity of the Messiah. He would be the Son of God, with unlimited authority in Heaven and earth. All the titles of royalty would be His, but in particular He would be born of the House of David. The perfect justice and righteousness that no earthly king could even hope to achieve would characterize his reign. Once ascended to His throne, there would never be another king, never a need for a successor. The drive behind it would be nothing related to human politics, but the desire of God Almighty Himself.

However, for a time, that destruction of Galilee must come first. After the first onslaught of Assyria in 732 BC, the surviving nobles of Ephraim and Manasseh did indeed fulfill this prophecy by declaring arrogantly that they would rebuild. Where there had been mere dried mud bricks, they would rebuild with cut stones. Where there had been the spongy sycamore trees native to that region, they would frame the buildings with indestructible cedar. They rejected the prophecies of Isaiah and other prophets sent to them before this, and remained unrepentant after it. Thus, the hand of God's wrath was still active.

Because they rejected the call to repentance and the one chance they had to remain a nation, they were destroyed. God would insure the arrogant nobles on one end and the corrupted pagan priests and prophets on the other would together be cut off. Those few who survived would become slaves. The final destruction of the leading households was assured, and there would be no mercy. With this, though, His hand was not yet finished.

Their unspeakable wickedness would consume them. Less than a decade after the initial Assyrian invasion, which had already destroyed Damascus, the Northern Kingdom was in revolt. Assyria came back and laid siege to Samaria in particular, which had been allowed to stand. Before long, the people were starving, eating the most repugnant things trying to stay alive. Infighting was rampant between the tribal leaders and it all contributed to their downfall.

Again, the dire refrain: God's wrath is not complete; His hand was still reaching out to destroy.

Chapter 10

Continuing the theme from the previous chapter, Isaiah points out a fourth major flaw in the national leadership. While the northern kingdom was long given to evil, the southern was little better for aping them. As the hand of God's wrath remains stretched out, not even the tool of His wrath escapes.

History is loaded with examples of magistrates and judges who dispensed rulings in their own personal interests. This was poking a finger in the eye of God. Those who were poor already had enough trouble in life without having justice perverted against them. There were few poorer than orphans and widows and these apparently suffered most. So the Lord says that all the unjust gain from the magistrates would be taken by the coming conqueror. Those who should have been the refuge of the powerless would find themselves without a refuge. Refusing to bow down to Jehovah, they would bow to their conquerors.

Yet Jehovah was still angry, because his chosen vessel of wrath was hardly any better than those upon whom wrath was poured. The Assyrian Emperor would proudly assume his success was the result of his own inherent greatness. The Assyrians were simply being hired for a job. Their conquests were setting them up for their own punishment. With all the ancient priestly scholarship and the detailed catalogs of world religions in their libraries, there was no excuse for assuming the God of Israel was related to the idols Israel had been worshiping in Samaria. Collecting pagan idols from every city he conquered only showed how silly the emperor could be. His hoard of treasure was heaped up for someone else to take.

Assyria was just a tool, as is every human government God allows to rise. Successfully building an empire was no mark of approval from God, only the reflection of usefulness for a time. When that time was past, they would likely meet a worse fate than those they brutally conquered. So it was with Assyria. One day, a staff for punishing Israel; the next day, she was a stick of wood for the fire. When God's judgment against her arrogance was finished, precious few of the imperial house would be living. This came true quite literally, for between 612 BC, when Nineveh was destroyed, to 605 BC at the Battle of Carchemish, the Assyrian ruling house declined rapidly.

The few from the northern Kingdom of Israel who survived Assyrian conquest in 722 BC would at least have a place to go. They would return to join the Kingdom of Judah, return to the God of their fathers. Destruction would turn to rejoicing and these would rediscover their proper place in God's divine plan.

Meanwhile, Assyria would not enter Jerusalem. The wrath of God would have run its course and the strength of Assyria would wane. As God had crushed previous national enemies – Midianites and Egyptians – so the Lord would do to Assyria. The northern kingdom would disappear for their recalcitrance in pursuing the sins of Jeroboam, but for the sake of God's covenant with Moses, He would spare the southern kingdom.

Isaiah paints a picture of Sennacherib descending down from the north, marking natural places where an army might camp in their progress. However, he would reach only as close as Nob – a small village where the Tabernacle once stood before Saul destroyed the priests for helping

David. It was a hilltop a few miles northeast of Zion, from which the Temple and palace of the City could be viewed. He would impotently shake his fist, but come no closer. While camped at Nob, his army would be destroyed (Assyria had troops at Nob watching Jerusalem while the bulk of forces were besieging Lachish).

Indeed, the result of Sennacherib's siege of Lachish was enough to strike terror in the heart of any conquering warrior. The morning dawned to find most of the troops dead in their tents. Like a bramble mowed down by an iron sword, so would the proud cedars of Assyrian military might be humbled. Before he could make up his mind to try again, Sennacherib had to return to his capital of Nineveh, where he died soon after.

Chapter 11

A common feature of Hebrew poetry is paralleling ideas. We are used to seeing a pair of lines together, each saying the same things in different terms. At other times, the second will extend the idea in the first. Another related concept is when the second line reverses the first, or contrasts two elements. At times, we aren't too sure whether something is meant to be a restatement or a contrast, or perhaps something of both. Such is the fuzzy logic of parabolic statements. As always, ultimate truth cannot be stated precisely in clinical or technical terms, so it must be revealed on a level above the intellect.

Here, Isaiah offers an example of the extended parallel. The chapter is divided into four patches of poetry. The first offers a contrast with the end of the previous chapter. Then we are given a parable. The premise is restated in the third, and then the fourth restates the parable differently.

We left chapter 10 with the Sennacherib's troops mowed down like weeds. While Israel would be mowed down in the process and Judah would be cut down to a lesser degree, there would be a more significant difference: Israel and Judah would grow back again from one root. It begins with a tender green sprig from the stump of Jesse. Not much, but a start. Unlike the national symbols of the Temple and the Ark of Covenant, which oftentimes were bereft of God's presence, the Holy Spirit would be wed to this descendant of David.

Because of that Presence in His Person, this Messiah would operate on a different plane. Rather than mere human reasoning and understanding, He would act on the logic of the Spirit. He would discern the ultimate truth of things and enforce the revelation of God by His words. His teaching would strike to the very soul of men, laying bare the difference between sin and righteousness.

With such a regime to rule among men, a spiritual government not anchored in this world, we should expect a return to Eden, a rebirth of Paradise. We are given parabolic language of a world without any threats. This is depicted as coming to the Real Zion in Heaven, the spiritual Temple of God in Eternity. While no one argues God couldn't do this literally, taking it that way does violence to the underlying image. The Messiah would not come to rule among men, but in the hearts of men. He would change their natures, remake them into people who do not see a need to fight and prey on others. Instead, they would fear nothing on this earth, because their home would be in Heaven.

The coming of the Branch of Jesse is restated, with the added concept of the Gentiles coming to join in this Spiritual Kingdom of Heaven, this place that simply cannot be described because there are no words for it. We are treated to a second parable that parallels the first. Instead of describing the animal kingdom turned upside down, Isaiah describes the political order turned upside down.

Having dealt with the Exile and Return, even in naming one of his sons, "A Remnant Shall Return," Isaiah refers to a different kind of Return. It won't be those born of Hebrew blood, but an Israel drawn from all mankind, a Spiritual Israel. These would come streaming to the Messiah from all the races of humanity. The old order of the Divided Kingdom would be forgotten. The previous enemies of Israel-the-nation, as symbols of those opposed to God's eternal plan in Israel-the-mission, would be vanquished. The images cannot be taken literally, for they describe something otherworldly. Thus, we see a replay of some of the Exodus, which Paul tells us was but a type of spiritual event (1 Corinthians 10:1-11).

Finally, we are given the message of John the Baptist, to make way for the Prince of Heaven, by paving the desert. We know John was referring to the opening of individual hearts to welcome the Messiah, hearts ravaged by falsehood and spiritual wandering. The first mention of that symbol was a reference to the Return from Exile. Had the historical Return been the real answer, John would not have called for a fresh Return. Rather, John spoke of a spiritual reality using parabolic terms. Both he and Jesus learned from reading Isaiah the art of parable, of using symbols to reveal truths too deep for words.

Chapter 12

Carrying over from the previous chapter, the context here continues with the symbolic Return from Exile. While the literal Restoration would come in about 536 BC, some 200 years into Isaiah's future, it was a symbol of something far greater, far later: The spiritual Restoration of a New Israel. Thus, John the Baptist associated this passage with a spiritual return from spiritual exile.

We are reminded here the phrase "in that day" refers to the day God judges sin. In the Hebrew mind, that could not possibly refer to some particular day on a calendar, or even a literal day, but refers to any time period when God acts mightily to remove sin. For those who have embraced sin, "that day" will be a very bad time, whenever it happens. To those who embrace repentance, "that day" will be a time of rejoicing, of relief from the oppression of sin. While it surely does echo some final day at the end of this age, such a reference simply gives meaning to any event that signals the judging hand of God. Because "that day" may come at any time during the life of true believers, and can come often, to attempt narrowing it down to a singular reference does violence to Isaiah's message.

So it is, the context here refers to That Day of the Messiah, with repercussions echoing down through history starting at the Cross. In His Kingdom, the Elect will take up a spiritual, otherworldly focus. They will confess the justice of God's anger against their sin. They will rejoice in the knowledge that His wrath is turned aside by the Blood of the Lamb. It will be hard to put into mere words how this will lift the hearts of the Redeemed. The image is given life by

the historical Restoration from Exile, as these words would reflect their just response, the response so few of them actually had.

Verse 3 offers the image of coming back to Jerusalem, of cleaning and reopening the well built on the Gihon Spring just outside the main eastern gate of the city during Old Testament times. This well is the most ancient symbol of why the city stood on that ridge, a powerful image of nostalgia to anyone who had ever lived there. From the most ancient times, a spring-fed water well was the most fundamental factor in siting a place to dwell. It was the ultimate symbol of God's provision for life and security. It is no surprise that this passage was considered a reference to the Holy Spirit. Without His presence in the human soul, the human was spiritually dead.

The single reason for God choosing Israel was for the sake of revelation. They were to be "a kingdom of priests," a term emphasizing their task of bringing God near to the rest of humanity. They failed miserably in this task. As early as Jonah's day, we see the arrogant racist attitude that all the rest of the world ought to die in their sins; Jonah actively resisted any call to bring the light of truth to Nineveh. The contempt Jews held for Gentiles in Jesus' day was painfully obvious, but only slightly worse than the leadership's contempt for Jewish peasants. It was this smug elitism that destroyed the mission of Israel to bring the light of truth to the world. Thus, a primary element of Jesus' mission during His life was to overcome this failure, to fill up the measure of what Israel failed to do in revealing Him to all humanity.

Again, it cannot be emphasized enough when reading Hebrew literature: We must not make the mistake of mentally limiting ourselves to a one-for-one relationship between images and what they may symbolize. In these few verses, we see at work the typical Hebrew mysticism, which weaves together into a single tapestry the literal historical events past and future, plus a higher meaning for which those events are symbols. It is truly rare when we can explain a Hebrew catchphrase as having only one, concrete meaning. Reading Isaiah from such a limited viewpoint is a serious error. All the meanings offered in this commentary here could be found in the rest of Scripture.

Chapter 13

In Isaiah's day (latter 8th Century BC), Assyria yet reigned supreme, her center of power in the northern reaches of the Mesopotamian Valley. Half way down that valley toward the swampy delta lay Babylon, struggling to break free of the Assyrian yoke. A century later, they would succeed and would then rule over Palestine. At some point, she would carry away most of what was left of Israel, holding the nation captive. Isaiah sees past all this, to the day the Medo-Persian Empire would rise to take God's revenge on her.

To the east of Babylon were the Zagros Mountains, the only real mountains within sight of the ancient capital. God calls for some unnamed messenger to climb up the highest peak of that range. The messenger is to wave a banner to the nations scattered on the other side, to the East. At that time, they were disorganized warring tribes. The messenger waves to them, calling them to come to Babylon, to enter the gates of the city. The Lord refers to these mixed Persian tribes as His anointed instruments of wrath. Some day, they would be united under a visionary leader

who would carry the banner of a religion – Zoroastrianism – that made room for recognizing Jehovah as the God of Heaven.

This mixed multitude would be welded into a single nation, forming a massive army that would overrun Mesopotamia. They would subdue all nations before them. Their battle savvy and relentless conquest would strike fear in the hearts of Babylon's mighty warriors and rulers. They will be stunned at the victories won against Babylon and come to fear the Medo-Persians.

Isaiah offers us a symbolic vision of the world turned upside down. The overwhelming power of the Medo-Persian military will be God's doing. In their unique ways and customs, they will be utterly foreign. What the world once took for granted as a common Semitic cultural basis would be plowed under the sandy plains of central Mesopotamia. It will be as disconcerting as if the stars fell from the sky. Indeed, the sky would become dark and luminaries would hide. Even the sun would become dark. The world would change forever, and the supremacy of Semitic nations, ascendant in civilization since the ancient Babel of Nimrod, would never again return.

God speaks of His ways. By no means will any nation escape His wrath for rejecting His commands under the Covenant of Noah. A particular sin is arrogance, in which Babylon excelled. Her ancient creed: Everything has a price and nothing else matters. Whatever she needed she bought or stole from others. What good is gold if there is no one left alive to spend it? Reaffirming His plan to shatter the ancient order of things, God warns that Babylon has provoked His anger as no other nation. No man would be left alive. The splendor of Babylon's courts, with servants from all over the world, would find them all fleeing to their homelands. The Medo-Persians would spare no one and nothing of the Babylonian people.

With all her wealth, she could not, however, buy off the Medo-Persian conquerors. We have records of the Medes joining forces under Cyrus as true believers, not moved by the prospect of plunder. They served from motives that the Babylonians could not comprehend. While Persians were at this time unknown, the Medes had already distinguished themselves as archers with trademark longbows, sometimes made of metal. This allowed them to double as close combat weapons, rather like staves. When Babylon was rising against the Assyrians, they hired the Medes as allies, but then betrayed them. So it was that the Medes joined the Persians in an empire conquered with an insatiable lust for destruction. While preserving cultural treasures such as the ancient libraries of clay tablets, they spared no life.

Babylon did bake many bricks for building, but the vast majority of her structures were lesser sun-dried bricks, rather like those of Egypt, mud with straw packed hard into very large blocks. There were places where this was the filler under baked bricks. Remove the outer cover and the first good rain would begin melting the interior fill. The Medo-Persian troops wasted no time pulling down the harder brickworks. In just a few generations, Babylon melted back into the swampy flats from which it was built. The fading structures would become the haunts of beasts of prey, something encouraged by the Medo-Persian rulers, so great was their hatred for Babylon.

Today we are hard put to find much of the ancient capital. Babylon is forgotten in the dust. Sadly, her spirit lives on. The Apostle John quotes freely the images and symbols Isaiah left.

Babylon would rise again and again until that final day when the Lord returns to wipe her clean from human memory.

Chapter 14

It requires a very pedestrian and worldly mind to render this chapter with any significant degree of literalness. The soaring imagery serves to symbolize the nature of events in the Spirit Realm. While the prophetic word here rests on very real historical events, it is anchored in eternity. To restrict this passage to literalism is to miss the message entirely.

God is sovereign over the affairs of all humanity. Unlike mankind, when He decides something, so it will be, regardless of what it appears to us as the recipients of His revelation. He has chosen to allow Israel to fall and be taken into exile. He has chosen to bring them back. This did happen, but the business of their escorts becoming their slaves cannot be read literally. The closest we can come to literalness would be the solicitous manner of Persian Imperial support for the Restoration. That so many in Israel did after Isaiah's time read it literally is part of what contributed to the False Messianic Expectations. That literal reading requires a corrupted and Westernized mind, twisting a mystical spiritual image into some monstrosity. It is enough to recognize that God can do anything pleasing Him.

Rather, the Kingdom of God inaugurated in Christ is the full realization of this image. Satan and his demons, for all their wiles, cannot harm us unless we surrender to them. But Satan's worst efforts still serve the Kingdom's purpose, even though we scarcely understand how. Thus, it should surprise no one that the image of Babylon remains one of Satan and his Kingdom of Darkness in the souls of fallen men. It is this kingdom that cannot receive spiritual truth and derides mystical revelations, because their dead spirits cannot receive God's truth or process it into something the mind can obey. Thus, while the literal historical Babylon would come someday in Isaiah's future, it was but a manifestation of something far, far older that would be around until all Creation is redeemed at the End. This is not simply about Babylon in 600 BC, but about Babylon the symbol of man's efforts to ignore the Spirit Realm. Demanding a literal rendering is the sin of Babylon.

Using broad-brush strokes, Isaiah paints a picture of what Babylon will be by describing how she will fall. The city festooned with gold, dominating such a vast stretch of earth, would fall suddenly. Her end would be a relief to all creation. We are told that Nebuchadnezzar had a thing for visiting his workmen in Lebanon and swinging an ax himself. The cedars of Lebanon symbolize kingdoms on the periphery of Imperial Babylon, which rejoiced when they saw the threat pass away.

Indeed, so great would be her fall that Babylon's royal house is portrayed as finding a raucous welcome in Hell. Preceding tyrants would rise to meet Babylon's rulers, welcoming them to their reserved place of suffering. Smack in the middle of this, Isaiah paints the imperial house of Babylon as Satan himself. The description is too much like that of Job 38:7 ("star" also means "prince") and Ezekiel 28:12-19, with the incredible arrogance of the power behind the throne of Tyre. It depicts the nature of Satan's fall and Isaiah points out how this strong similarity doomed the imperial house of Babylon. Indeed, it was so much more like Satan than any human

ruler that the imperial household would not be allowed to molder in its own graves like all the other great rulers. Instead, the tombs would be desecrated and the bodies exposed to ridicule. There will come a time when Satan will experience something similar.

Great though she would be in her day, Babylon would pass into the sands of time. No one of the imperial house survived and the city disappeared, as described in the previous chapter. The God who raised her up will in turn crush her down. It will be no different from the Assyrian Empire before her, against whom Babylon would rise up in a successful revolt. This Babylonian rise will be made possible by God's crushing first of Assyria. This would happen in Isaiah's future, depicted as perishing in great numbers on the mountains near Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:35-36). God had decided, and so it would be done.

Sometime before this confrontation, Isaiah notes what the death of King Ahaz means to the Philistines. Uzziah was pretty rough on the Philistines while Isaiah was quite young. His son Ahaz was wimpy enough to allow the Philistines to recover and take some Judean territory. Isaiah knew in his spirit that Ahaz's successor, Hezekiah, would be nothing like his father and much more powerful than his grandfather. Thus, Hezekiah later attacks and destroys several of the great cities of Philistia. From the very beginning, they were known for coming up into the Israeli hill country during harvest, in part because they believed their god Dagon had given all grain to them, regardless who grew it. Isaiah makes reference to these annual raids by noting that even the poorest of Judea would be prosperous because the Philistines would be unable to raid for quite some time under Hezekiah's pressure.

Oddly, this military victory would be the excuse Babylon needed, during the fading power of Assyria, to send envoys to Jerusalem. Naturally, they were hoping to convince Hezekiah to be their ally in throwing off the Assyrian yoke. While Hezekiah did act the fool in showing them all the royal treasures, he did one thing right. The Babylonians asked excitedly about his military campaign against Philistia and were prepared to offer adulation for Hezekiah's military prowess, which they hoped to use against Assyria. Judah's king dodged it by ascribing all protection for Jerusalem to Jehovah.

Isaiah teaches that this is the correct answer of God's People throughout eternity to any overtures from the worldly minds of fallen men. We cannot afford to compromise by allowing Satan's friends to pull us down into the dirt.

Chapter 15

Moab was the nation that grew from Lot's elder daughter. The strange story of how his daughters seduced him in the cave near Zoar was included in Genesis merely to explain the complicated relationship between Moab and Israel. While Moab had by the time of the Exodus sunk into the most degrading pagan idolatry, they were still cousins to Israel. Thus, at times they were bitter enemies, and at other times good allies.

As Isaiah prophesies of their coming doom, his tone is somewhat sympathetic. There is some debate in translating portions of this chapter, but we can make intelligent guesses. For example, Isaiah refers to "the waters of Dimon". While some manuscripts make this out to be "Rimon" – a place not known to us – this appears somewhat a pun on the name of the town Dibon,

modified with the Hebrew word for blood (*dam*). There are examples in other parts of the Old Testament where such puns might be entirely humorless.

We are given a picture of wistfulness. We don't know exactly when the fulfillment takes place, but Isaiah sees the major cities and towns of Moab destroyed. It would appear to have happened more than once, but the first time would be soon, probably under the Assyrians. The destruction is clearly vindictive, not simply an act of war. Thus, the Moabites are described as going to their temples and high places to perform various rituals of sorrow. One includes a sacrificial act of shaving the entire head. They also wear sackcloth and ashes, weeping outside their homes. The cacophony from the twin cities of Heshbon and Elealeh can be heard some 7 or 8 miles (11-13km) away in Jahaz. The sense of depression echoes what we read in Job.

The primary route for refugees seems to be south into Edom. Most of the cities of Moab are congregated in the north of their ancestral lands. The landmarks mentioned by Isaiah, when they can be identified, are all toward the south. Zoar appears to be in the foothills of the eastern slope on the Dead Sea, down at the southern end. While we aren't sure about the Ascent of Luhith, it is probably another name for the road running down the wadi which empties near Horonaim. That city is on the peninsula jutting into the Dead Sea from the east side. That region should have been seasonal grassy plains, but during this disaster, it was barren. Worst of all, those who escape would face the lions that once roamed that area.

The next chapter continues this lament.

Chapter 16

The contents of chapters 15 and 16 are paralleled in Jeremiah 48. Translations of this particular chapter into English often conflict, because the tone is not immediately discernible. In the middle of preaching to Moab, Isaiah takes a shot at his own people, as well. Notwithstanding their sins, the misfortune of a neighbor and cousin is no cause for mirth.

With the picture of Moab fleeing south across the agricultural lands toward Edom, we must take a moment to remind ourselves that Edom had been humbled a generation before Isaiah's time by king Amaziah. By fleeing there, Moab was placing herself under Judah's care. Isaiah advises Moab to reinstate the tribute they once gave to King David, symbolized by the sending of a lamb. Once they arrive in Sela, today known as Petra (the fortress carved into the walls of a desert canyon), they will owe some form of tribute if they wish to stay and that tribute goes to the King of Judah. Moab would have little choice, since they would be comparable to a fledgling bird freshly kicked from the nest, fleeing across the Arnon River.

The next few verses are a call from God to His own people to give the Moabites refuge: "Please let the Moabite fugitives live among you." Judah is encouraged and can afford to do it, because the Lord would ensure that the Assyrians would not destroy Jerusalem. Displaying such mercy would strengthen the throne of David. Whether Moab will listen is not the point; they cannot hear the truth of God's Word until they are given refuge. The starting point is demonstrating the spirit of mercy Moses commanded of the Jews in dealing with refugees.

Of course, it's altogether likely the Moabites will not listen. Their one claim to fame was arrogance. The royal house is pictured as a pampered and implacable brat. Yesterday's proud fool will be tomorrow's whining victim, and sympathy will be hard to summon for them. Thus, about the only people wailing for the losses of Moab will be the Moabites themselves. As far south as Kir Haresheth, the Assyrians will pull down cities until the foundations are laid bare.

Not just the cities, but also the famous vineyards of Heshbon and Sibmah in the northern end of Moab, a region famous for its wines, would be devastated. Seedlings from those vineyards were sold to many nations, but they would be gone forever from their home ground. The glorious breadbasket and fruit basket of Moab would become a wilderness. Her customers in Judah and elsewhere would miss that produce and for this reason alone might express some sorrow.

Isaiah promises this will happen soon. They've been ignoring the warnings for so long that he hardly expects them to listen now. Still, the Lord had set a date. The picture is that of a bonded servant, selling his labor for a three-year period. That was a common term of service in those days, particularly when someone was working off a large debt. As the term of service drew to a close, their zeal would flag, and their eyes often stray to the path home. Thus, it's a way of saying, "three years, maybe." Then would come the Assyrian hordes.

Chapter 17

Isaiah continues a roundup of the various neighbors of Judah in how they will fare when Assyria sweeps across that region. It is critical that we remind ourselves of the context in which the prophecy comes. At this point, Syria leads a coalition that includes Israel, all or part of Ammon, Moab, and a handful of other petty kingdoms in the region. This is the same alliance that demanded Judah join in facing Assyria. While there are some variations in this chapter among various biblical texts, the critical message is hardly affected.

Damascus was the arrogant capital of the region roughly equivalent to modern Syria. It is reputed to have served a massive pantheon of pagan deities. We can be certain her grand army included a large number of mercenary forces, fielding a substantial force. However, even with the allies around her, she was no match for Tiglath-pileser's Assyrian expedition. The capital city of Damascus was virtually flattened. When she fell, all her allies were crushed, as well. Moab was already discussed and Ammon would suffer the same eventual fate of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. The region would become suitable for sheep and goat herders, since they would not have to get permission from fussy city rulers claiming the pasturelands.

We pay particular attention to Syria's junior partner, Samaria (as Jacob or Ephraim). The land would not be completely depopulated, though it would come close. Isaiah offers the image of the Rephaim Valley. Famous for its grain fields, it was for that reason also a favored vector of approach to Jerusalem for the Philistines, a nation of grain thieves. Assyria would reap the harvest of battle in the Northern Kingdom, leaving only a little for gleaning. In the ancient times of harvesting by hand, it was customary to leave some, if only for the sake of diminished returns in going after every single piece of produce. Thus, the poor peasants coming later could expect to find a few stalks of grain at the edges, a few clusters of grapes maturing too late, or a

few olives left in upper branches and near the trunk of the tree. Just so, only a few people would not be slain or deported under Assyrian imperial policy.

Isaiah depicts the remaining peasants of the Northern Kingdom as relieved to be out from under the idolatry mandated by Samaria, inaugurated by Jeroboam when the Ten Tribes first went their own way. These scattered remnants would turn back to the Temple in Jerusalem, no longer pursuing the Baals, Ashtartes, and various shrines scattered around Palestine. At long last, the land would have rest from spiritual bondage. Even the greatest cities would be populated as mere villages, repeating the theme of the olive tree symbol of Israel the nation, with a thin scattering of olives for gleaning. The cause behind all of this is the persistent refusal to repent from the Sin of Jeroboam – making faith a matter of politics. All their prosperity and growth would evaporate, leaving very little.

Yet, even Assyria does not escape God's wrath. While it is she who will execute His judgment on Syria, Israel, and their allies, she was not so mighty as to resist God's power. He can raise them up; He can knock them back down. This tsunami of troops is but a small wave made by the motion of God's hand. All of them are just shards of grain husks in the wind of His breath. In one evening, such a disaster fell on Assyria's troops as to have no words for it. By dawn, there would be no mighty army, but a broken remnant, much as Assyria left her victims. This is what God does to those who dare to go too far, refusing to acknowledge His authority to call a halt. Assyria had been warned that it was Jehovah who had called them, and it was Jehovah who called a halt outside Jerusalem. When she would not listen, her imperial power was broken.

Chapter 18

Many commentators complain that this is the most difficult chapter in Isaiah. Those who claim to have it all nailed down are the least trustworthy. Hebrew is more of images and symbols, while precise declarations in prophesy are rare for the simple reason that such concrete clarity is contrary to the nature of spiritual truth. Context is everything and the application of symbols in this context is not immediately apparent to us. Precise translation is difficult and highly disputed, but some things are fairly obvious.

The most useful consensus points to Cush, the nation of Ethiopians in those days occupying modern Sudan and Southern Egypt. This is the one place in the world where a huge population with an ancient culture is built in a land that slopes downward to the north. During Isaiah's time, the ancient Ethiopian nation ruled Egypt.

We know that both Egyptians and Ethiopians traveled a great deal by reed boats, since the Nile was the center of life and reeds of various sorts were more abundant there than trees. The Nile was the source of life and the main highway. Civilization spread very little beyond the hills and mountains on either side of it in Egypt, hemmed in as they were by deserts, but the Upper Nile Valley of ancient Ethiopia was less constricted. Thus, the Ethiopians had managed to scatter their influence far beyond their own borders at various times.

Even Ethiopia knew the growing threat of Assyria, so these tall and smooth folks had sent messengers to many lands. They sought alliances to gather a force large enough to overwhelm

Assyria. Isaiah, living as royal family in the Jerusalem court, could not have missed their arrival, or the nature of their business. They sought from Judah a quick answer to their offer of alliance by swift couriers so that the necessary organization could begin immediately. Naturally, the Ethiopian emissaries extolled the virtues of their rulers, of a land where the people had been fearsome warriors since the beginning of time, arising in the land of the Upper Nile Valley.

Isaiah gives voice to God's answer. There is no rebuke, but a simple answer amounting to, "Thanks, but no thanks." Were God in need of any nation on earth for any purpose, He could call them and there would be no mistaking it. Indeed, Assyria rose at God's beckoning. They would also be vanquished at God's behest, without any human aid. So the Lord says to Isaiah, "I am not in a panic over Assyria." Isaiah gives us the image of God sitting serenely on His throne in the Holy of Holies, gazing out across the landscape at the invading forces of Assyria, without a hint of concern.

He describes the invaders as setting up their siege lines, and settling in for an extended stay. It would be rather like grape vines in full flower, with the promise of a rich harvest. But, just as the flowers reach their climax of glory and sweet smell, the whole vineyard will be pruned harshly. The promise of victory and glory for Assyria will evaporate before they can get a good start. Their carcasses will feed scavengers for the better part of a year.

As always, in Hebrew literature, the term "Day of the Lord" carries a certain ambiguity. Rather than the end of all things, it is more focused on the end of sin. Any day when God reveals His truth and power can be called "that day." Thus, when this massive slaughter of Assyrian troops comes about, it won't be long after that when the Ethiopians will come to visit again. Instead of coming to offer Judah, as a lesser entity, their protection as a mighty power, they will be offering a gift to Jehovah. They will see that He is more than sufficient to vanquish all of His enemies, and that He can sweep aside the most powerful nation on earth with the casual flick of His finger. Ethiopia will come in grateful recognition of the Lord's benevolent dominion over all the earth.

Yet again, because "That Day" is a spiritual reference, as it manifests repeatedly at various points in human history, in various ways. We aren't sure whether the ancient Ethiopian Empire actually sent an offering to Jehovah during that period, but we do know that there were a surprising number of Jews in the Ethiopian court in New Testament times. Further, it was but a mere century later that they were known as a largely Christian nation. While modern Western minds find this a reckless disregard of historical context, it is altogether proper in Ancient Near Eastern culture. Isaiah could care less if the response of Ethiopia was in historical proximity to the event evoking their gratitude. The Spirit Realm is wholly unbound by our sense of time. In Scripture, we explain what we see from revealed truth. Events must be arranged in our minds as explained by higher understanding, not to suit the needs of mere human logical comfort.

Chapter 19

Egyptian civilization goes so far back into time that it's hard to be sure just when it began. The various ruling regimes were quite proud of this and considered themselves the most ancient of kingdoms. They were also one of the most degradingly heathen cultures, and their vast

pantheon of deities still confuses us today. A critical part of understanding the Ten Plagues of the Exodus is wrapped up in noting which major deities were embarrassed by the natural disasters, and which were off the scale of anything recorded in the Egyptian annals.

These deities were all powerless against the God of Israel, which was precisely the point. God steers the major events of history to suit His purposes. While hardly every detail is revealed, there are times when the prophetic word clarifies some event as indicating something about God Himself and this is the crux of all biblical revelation. Isaiah records his prophecy regarding events in Egypt; not the whole history, but those events to which God speaks.

The details are rather fuzzy, but Egypt was ruled by a quick succession of regime changes. Not only were the noble families of old fighting amongst themselves, but Ethiopia and Libya took their turns on the throne, as well. This quick series of turnovers left Egypt mortally weak in the face of the invading Assyrians. These in turn gave way to an invasion from Babylon, which then handed off Egypt to the Medo-Persian Empire. This last was particularly oppressive, so the conquest of Alexander the Great came as some relief. While the hinterlands were seldom any less heathen, changing only the deities they adhered to, the various cities, and particularly the Nile Delta region, saw the rise of a powerful Hellenizing influence.

Into this mix we find a truly large portion of Jews had migrated to Egypt, more or less in flight from the Babylonians. Thus, it was Babylon that caused the bulk of Jewish population to split between those they carried off to Mesopotamia and those who fled to the Nile Valley. All of this figures into Isaiah's prophecy in this and the next chapter.

Isaiah opens with a renewal of the primary sin of Egypt: idolatry. Because so much of it was a mere reflection of politics, the religious scene there was quite confused. It seemed every new ruler had his or her own favorite deities, officially promoted over the others. The internal fighting between noble houses and between various shrines became so partisan that the Nile nation was ripe for the picking. All their ancient wisdom would be drowned in the confusion. While Assyria did a lot of damage, it was Babylon who plundered all Egypt's oldest treasuries and temples, and Medo-Persia taxed them without mercy. Egypt would be laid low, just as before in the Exodus.

They would be further weakened by a long and intense drought. The whole reason Egypt existed was to exploit the annual flooding in the Nile Valley. Without that, the nation had no economy. All the ancient families in their traditional capital cities – Zoan in the lower Delta, Memphis (Noph) at the head of Delta region – would all appear foolish. With all their ancient libraries and academies, they would not be able to muster the wisdom to bring stability. The Lord would send them an intoxicating spirit of folly.

The rather plain narrative tone starting in verse 16 describes the flight from Judah of the rebels against Babylon, leaving their homeland nearly empty of any remaining Jews. Their arrival in Egypt was simply the herald of the pursuing Babylonian army. Thus, any mention of Jews and their homeland would be bad news. After the storm had passed, the Jews would build a new home in Egypt. Five cities became so dominated by Jewish culture that their language (quite similar to the old Canaanite) was the primary tongue heard. Referring to the "City of Destruction" (in some Hebrew texts) is a typical Hebrew pun, as the Hebrew word for "sun"

(*shemmesh*) sounds similar to the word for “destruction” (*heh’res*); making light of “City of the Sun” (Heliopolis), home of the Temple of Ra. In place of this sort of ancient pagan shrine would be monuments to Jehovah, even a copy of the Temple in Jerusalem.

These Jewish influences would presage the coming of Christianity some centuries later. It requires a grasp of symbolic logic to see how the prophecy here refers to Alexander, who delivered Egypt from Persia and built a city after his own name, a new center of Hellenistic culture. But an even greater Savior would come later. He will be known in Egypt and people would frequently remark that He had dwelt there as a child, when His parents fled Herod. That all of this is implied can be quite confusing to a Western rationalist mind yet is common as dirt in Hebrew prophetic writing.

Eventually, under Alexander and his successors, the high level of Jewish traffic between the rather young and fresh Alexandrian community and the dusty old blue bloods who remained in Babylon made Jerusalem as much a stop on the way as it was a destination in itself. This prefigures the glories of the Messianic Age when the world would be cleansed of sin and sinners, and only His people will be left. All nations would then dissolve into one in Him. To an extent, this is already true in the Spiritual Kingdom of Light, but would be more literally so in the end.

Chapter 20

In these few verses we raise a primary issue in reading Hebrew literature. If, as is the Western habit of mind, we take this narrative in its most literal meaning, we are faced with an apparent inconsistency. Would the Lord have commanded Isaiah to walk about completely nude for three years? Scholars debate this at great extent, often on completely false grounds, ignoring the symbolic nature of Hebrew prophetic literature.

First, the historical setting: Sargon, Emperor of Assyria, faced a revolt from the Philistines at Ashdod. He sent his chief commander, whose title is *Tartanu* in Assyrian, at the head of a punitive expedition. This would be approximately 711 BC. The regent of the Philistines was deposed and the city was destroyed. This puts the prophecy of Isaiah some forty years prior to the event he describes.

It was during this siege of Ashdod that the Spirit of the Lord commanded Isaiah to remove his sandals and outer garment. At this time Isaiah was wearing sackcloth, but the command did not necessarily mean going completely nude. Jews did wear an undergarment, which we might call a loincloth. This act of removing outer clothing was symbolic, not sympathetic. Nor is it necessary to assume that he spent every day of all three years running around in his underwear. He did so during the exercise of his prophetic office, which surely included other things than recorded in this text. The symbolic act was purely contextual and was understood as a symbolic prophetic act by the people who knew Isaiah.

Given the nature of things in ancient times, the siege of Ashdod could have easily taken the better part of three years. This is particularly so if we include the several months when the Assyrian army was some distance away. If not by messengers dispatched by the Assyrians, then just about anyone with an interest in Philistia who happened to be in the region of the Assyrian

capital, or anywhere along the path of march from whence this particular force came, could have easily brought word well in advance of the assault. The bulk of the troops were marching in battle formation, carrying some portion of their necessary supplies, or gathering them from tributary states on the way. Once on the field at the city of Ashdod, there would be official notice read out loud to the Philistine officials, and so forth. This was hardly a lightning raid moving troops by air or even by wheeled vehicles.

Thus, in the context of this passage, it would seem Isaiah carried out this symbolic act of “nakedness” pretty much for as long as it took for the Assyrian troops to come, do their work, then go. Three years, or enough of it to say “three years,” sounds about right. At the end of it all, Isaiah would then announce the meaning of his symbolic act, speaking of himself in the third person. This was also quite common in that day and culture.

While we might today have some Victorian notions about shameful exposure of flesh, we cannot assume our attitude would be the same as Hebrews or Egyptians in 700 BC. We are deeply infected with an underlying Grecian assumption that the human form is somehow beautiful, especially if someone’s physical condition approaches the rational ideal for such beauty. This concept was wholly lacking in the East. So while our Victorian heritage tries to cover it up in some sort of shame, it’s a facade; we still have the urge to peek at nude figures with an eye for sexual arousal. The Eastern reflex would be quite different. They would turn away in genuine embarrassment.

The whole point is a warning against the pro-Egypt party in Jewish leadership during Isaiah’s day. Philistia supposedly had an alliance with Egypt/Ethiopia at the time. It did them no good at all. They were left standing naked before the Assyrian onslaught. So it was with those in Jerusalem who were so very certain that they had an ironclad deal with their former slave masters on the Nile. Trusting them would leave Judah exposed. As it was, here we see a rather literal warning that the Egyptians themselves would be led away stripped of clothing. This would be utterly humiliating, but was just the sort of terrorizing thing Assyria was known for, having a good grasp of other cultures. Whatever would be the worst thing they could do to a humbled foe is what they would do, to insure everyone knew beyond all doubt Assyria was to be feared.

Thus, Isaiah warns those who trust in Egypt/Ethiopia will be ashamed that they had dared to think it would make any difference. They will pace to and fro, wringing their hands, as it were, fearful of the same being done to themselves. There was no earthly ally upon which they could rely, no place to run and hide away from Assyria.

Of course, this was in contrast to Isaiah’s stern warning to trust in the God who could easily defeat Assyria’s best troops. “How shall we escape? Turn to Jehovah!”

Chapter 21

In a trio of short prophecies, Isaiah sees many painful days ahead for several nations. We note there is some variation in how this chapter is read among scholars. However, the basic message is too obvious. The scope of suffering these three must endure is what ties them together.

Before it was built up, the area of Babylon was just a salt marsh. The whole region upward from the shore of the Persian Gulf (the shore of which was far inland from where it rests today) even today is pretty much a wilderness. When the city was built, during times when the hands of maintenance were lax, the canals quickly became brackish pools. So it is that this kingdom on the shore is essentially built up from the wilderness. In spiritual terms, it remained a wilderness while it stood.

More than a century into Isaiah's future, Babylon would rise up and throw off the Assyrian yoke. In so doing, they would have the help of their allies, the Medes and Persians. While Babylon lives her short time of glory, the Medo-Persian Empire is welded together under Cyrus, whose driving theme is his new religion, Zoroastrianism. Perhaps his new devotion gave him release from his nation's previous alliance with Babylon. At any rate, the Medo-Persian Empire is seen as deceiving and treacherous in their dealings with Babylon. Because the Persians arose from the eastern slope of the Zagros Mountains and very early conquered the Elamites just over on the west slope of the same mountains, Isaiah calls the Persians "Elam," and recognizes the Medes by their homeland, Media.

This conquest by the Medo-Persian forces was quite bloody and it would have been gut-wrenching as visions go. The Fall of Babylon is a tale well known, of Belshazzar with no accomplishments, attempting to play the big shot with the nobles by throwing a big party. Their watchmen partied, too, and the princes had not bothered to bring the typical ceremonial battle garb. So the invasion came upon the city utterly defenseless. Had there been a watchman, he might have seen the characteristic first wave of riders on chariots pulled by horses, onagers, or even camels. These were quite common in Persian assault troops.

The watchman symbolizes the spiritual man who sees with spiritual eyes. The futility of calling out to God's people to turn back to Him and be faithful is seen in all the power God gathers to conquer the Nation of Israel, too. The watchman cries with all his passion (literally, "He cried as a lion"). But nothing stops the doom. So while he is watching, along comes a charioteer with news of the battle. "Babylon is fallen" carries a massive weight of meaning not obvious from a quick reading. As a pagan nation, it is most surely fallen, but it symbolizes all the worst of mankind's sins, a place where everything can be had for a price and nothing else really matters. Eventually, this will bring Babylon down in a literal sense, but woe to those who pull from the ashes that same materialistic attitude of life.

So it is, Isaiah warns there is in the Fall of Babylon both good and bad news. For the Exiles, it will mean they can come home to Judea. The bad news is that the whole region of Canaan Land is in for a series of very brutal conquests. Isaiah refers to his people as those about to be threshed for their sins.

"Dumah" is obviously Edom; scholars guess it is play on words, for it means a place that is quiet and empty. Edom was, of course, the nation that arose from Esau. The land was quite rich in mineral resources, particularly copper and sulfur. It was also a tollbooth on the ancient Kings Highway, running from the upper crossing of the Euphrates down to the port at Ezion Geber, or the Way of Shur to the Nile Delta. The small nation was quite rich, but typically rejected Esau's God.

So the Edomites were in for some bad times. Assyria made them pay a crushing tribute in copper, but so did Babylon and the Persians. More than once, the main cities were nearly leveled in reprisals for rebellion. Should they have come to the Temple to ask of the Lord their fate, He would tell them nothing because they reject Him as Lord. So He tells them, "If you want to inquire of Me, you must do so as My servants. Come back to Me as your Lord." Half measures of devotion would not be acceptable.

There was a wide array of Arabian tribes scattered on the periphery of the settled lands in Palestine. Dedan and Kedar were ascendant among those tribes during Isaiah's lifetime. Dedan could be quite friendly, known for rescuing those who became lost in their grazing lands. Assyria crushed them at some point, making Tema an alternate palace of the empire. Assyria also enslaved a large portion of Kedar, which had long struggled to remain independent. Again, Isaiah uses the image of a man under a labor bond – when the termination draws near, he will work less and be likely to leave a little early. This came in just under a year from the prophecy Isaiah records here.

At times these were all rivals and enemies of Israel. Yet Isaiah cannot help but be stirred by the suffering in store for them. Such sorrow cannot avoid touching Israel, for she is hardly any better in God's eyes, in a sense.

Chapter 22

Assyria destroyed the Northern Kingdom and carried away most of her citizens to a far land. At some point she attempted to do the same to the Southern Kingdom. While the troops managed to destroy several cities and devoured the produce of the land, Zion was spared and Assyria's forces died in the night. In a short time, the empire fell. Part of her demise was the revolt of Babylon, with her Persian allies. We can't know at what point in the story this vision comes to Isaiah, but it would seem to be on the eve of Assyria's failed siege of Lachish, when Jerusalem was also surrounded.

Isaiah paints for us the image of a deep and depressing vision, the most common symbolic association with valleys. Thus, the Valley of Vision is a heavy burden, for it brings no good news. The great city of the Temple was normally such a bustling and cosmopolitan place. Everyone in the city is distracted from such a boisterous normal existence. Instead of everyone going about their business, they are gathering on the rooftops in nervous anticipation of what can be seen over the walls of the city, not from the Assyrian siege, but Babylon's. Already men are dead, but not from battle. Rather, they are dead from starvation. Isaiah sees this latter siege, when the city would have finally sinned so much that there was no further reprieve.

During that Babylonian siege, the royal house and many nobles attempted to flee by night through a breach in the city walls. When the encircling army learned of it, they caught up with the refugees. The capturing party was mostly archers, lightly armed, who travel fast and can attack from a distance. A short time later the city surrendered and all the survivors were herded into tight groups. The entire vision tears at Isaiah's heart.

Jesus would understand this scene centuries later, weeping over the city about to be destroyed. She has rejected God's message repeatedly. Nothing in the message demands more than Zion

can bear, but she refuses any part of it. It is with some mocking bitterness and sarcasm that Isaiah suggests anyone near him cares enough to bother asking why he weeps and cries aloud over the needless destruction. Because the city refuses to weep for her own sins, Mount Zion and the surrounding valleys themselves weep. Those valleys would be filled with siege troops drafted by Babylon from her neighbors, with their many differing battle tactics and strategies. Isaiah sees the frightening prospect as if it were immediately real.

In the rejection of God's provision, a provision proved in the previous defeat of Assyria, it was too late for Jerusalem. The Lord removed His protection. The King's trust in the House of the Forest armory was in vain. All the work to make the water tunnel run down to the protected pool was actually pointless. Dismantling houses to buttress the walls, building the lower pool between the inner and outer defense walls – it meant nothing because they did not turn to their God who made the stones and the water. When God called them to repent, they partied as if there were no tomorrow. When God calls for a day of mourning, you can obey then or mourn later when everyone around you dies.

At various points in his prophetic career, Isaiah faced opposition from what amounted to a political party within the royal council. This party called for an alliance with Egypt against the Assyrians and would arise again when Babylon threatened. This same party would eventually murder the governor placed by Babylon, and then flee to Egypt, dragging the prophet Jeremiah along. During Isaiah's time, a major figure in this party was the Royal Scribe, Shebna. Isaiah mocked this pretentious man's purchase of a custom hand-cut tomb near the city, for he was about to lose his high position and would die in an open wasteland.

In that time and place, houses were often built of stone, perhaps braced up with a wood frame, and then plastered over. Any weight bearing fixtures must be placed during the initial stone placement. Many homes had hanging pegs carefully rooted between the wall stones, plastered around to stabilize. Shebna was likened to a peg that would not hold anything useful, so it would be removed from its place and the hole plastered over – he would be forgotten.

In his place would be Eliakim, a faithful servant of God and of the royal house. He would be like the peg that could not be removed. Yet, when the day of judgment finally came, even such good and righteous men as Eliakim would die. While the specific fulfillment points to the Siege of Babylon, the general principle runs much deeper. When God comes against sin in a nation, even good people get hurt.

Chapter 23

We do not know the origins of the Phoenician people, but first find them settled along the northern coast of Palestine. In the Bible, their name is Canaan, a reference to the ancient murex red-purple dye that was their primary stock and trade. Great early seafarers, they were known for their devotion to profit, more or less as a deity. It was they who first taught King Solomon about borrowing, investing and interest. It was their Princess Jezebel who raised idolatry to such great political power in the Northern Kingdom. The Phoenicians did not hesitate to carry on a brisk trade in Israeli slaves. Sidon was their home city in the region and Tyre was their colony, eventually becoming the throne, not to mention primary seaport.

Isaiah pictures the ships coming from Tarshish (most likely referring to Spain), stopping at the Phoenician colony of Cyprus on the way and learning their destination of Tyre has been destroyed. All their freight will bring them no profit, because the port and harbor are destroyed. During Isaiah's time, Tyre was the primary market for Egyptian grain, who in turn carried it all over the Mediterranean. The image shows merchants in deep depression over the loss of such a powerful market. Sidon cries out as a city with no population. Egypt won't be too happy with the loss of her number one trading partner.

The residents of Tyre and Sidon are warned to flee, to leave the cities and run to Tarshish with their tears. Looking at the future ruins, people will wonder if this had ever been such a mighty city, as Tyre could become vacant rubble. This was the famous city built on a rock just off shore, a uniquely wealthy city of great beauty. Who would plan such destruction? Jehovah, the one who granted them the power to make such wealth. It's the way God handles the arrogance of worldly authority.

Isaiah depicts the Phoenicians as fleeing in all directions like water bubbling up from a spring. Too late! The Lord has decided to shake the land, to destroy its prize fortresses. Even if they flee to their colony of Cyprus, they can't rest. It, too, will be taken over by their enemies. What enemies? The Chaldeans of Babylon were conquering everything they could reach. While it's true that Nebuchadnezzar was unable to break into Tyre after a twelve-year siege, he did destroy everything else belonging to the Phoenicians and forced Cyprus to pay tribute. These Chaldeans were nobodies, just rude desert rats when Assyria built them up, gave them civilization and made them great. Lacking in gratitude, they rose against their former masters and destroyed them. While Tyre was safe, the Phoenicians were nearly destroyed.

From the time of Nebuchadnezzar's failed siege, weakened Tyre would hardly be of any significance for the lifespan of most kings, seventy years. They became good friends with Babylon's conquerors, the Persians, but didn't rise to any prominence for quite some time. Tyre courting the Persians was like a pitiful aging harlot. No longer pretty enough to draw customers, she entertains as best she can by exercising her few remaining talents. Ancient harlots were usually entertainers in the broader sense and it was common to find the old ones singing in the streets, haunting their old customers for a tiny portion of their former wages. After seventy years of obscurity, the old harlot Tyre would again become famous and find new clients. However, that would be about the time the Persians demand she contribute to the rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem in the Restoration.

With this, Isaiah ends his burdens against neighboring nations and returns to lashing his own people with the Word of God. Let the nations know that these calamities come upon them as part of the collateral damage for punishing Israel.

Chapter 24

We begin here four chapters regarding the final redemption. The starting point is the judgment against sin. At the same time, Isaiah reveals some underlying principles of Creation and the Fall. It is critical to keep in mind that Isaiah speaks not so much from the Law of Moses, but the Covenant of Noah, and how all things point to the spiritual realities behind them. Thus, seeing

this merely as a future point in time misses a wealth of understanding about how God does things, of how He relates to His Creation.

With a word, the Lord created all things. With a word, He dismisses it all. Indeed, were He not actively engaged in holding it all together, it would come apart on its own. When God acts, no living being is exempt. When it comes time to end this earth, no one will escape. There is no favored group.

Such wholesale destruction will come as a relief to the earth. It groans under the load of sinful men. Humanity is the disease on Creation, because mankind has rejected every covenant offered by God. Sin has brought every curse, and Creation is subjected to involuntary suffering. Precious few at any time have turned to the Lord.

There comes a place where the pleasures of the flesh fail to bring even that shallow happiness so many seek. Wine and song, symbols of celebration, have no meaning and bring no pleasure. It's all an act, going through the motions. In the end, it leaves bitterness. The noisy nightlife and house parties in the city last only so long as the city gates. Mere planks and beams can be easily broken and burned. The harvest of sin is not simply death, but a dismal, slow passing.

In the middle of such a thing, there are just a few who really understand. When they sing and rejoice, it has meaning, because they celebrate God. From the very first light of dawn, they call upon His name. Scattered abroad in all the earth can be found His grace in human hearts, and it brings glory to the Lord. Yet, in the midst of this abundant spiritual living, Isaiah complains that he has been robbed. He gets precious little of this fat harvest of righteousness and glory because he lives among conniving liars and schemers who have defrauded his people morally.

There is no escape. No man, regardless how fit, athletic and skillful, can avoid eventual capture in his sin. There is no place to hide, for God Himself pours out judgment like the rain from Heaven. Should you be alive to see it, you would think the earth itself were a stumbling drunk, unable to maintain its course in space.

Isaiah warns the punishment will begin with those in power. This points to the Covenant of Noah. Hardly to be taken literally, the image of herding rulers into the large pits used in ancient times as impromptu prisons indicates where the responsibility for failing Noah begins. Rulers have the privilege of rank and power, but it comes with a higher degree of accountability. Eventually, God does act as He has promised and nations, kingdoms and states that transgress Noah will always fail. The Lord revealed His will for the governments of mankind via the Temple in Jerusalem. Since Israel herself rejected the Law of Moses, which was supposed to clarify Noah by example, it's no surprise no nation ever gets it right.

Chapter 25

We bear in mind that there is a timeless quality here as Isaiah celebrates the Lord. He stands in a position of one who lives in history, but whose heart is taken up into a spiritual place where time and events are symbols of God's revelation. Thus, Isaiah rejoices in things yet to be as if they were already accomplished, because in the Spirit Realm all things are current. The whole

span of history is a single event to the Lord, and to stand with God – to confess His glory – includes taking His perspective on things.

Thus, the first verse highlights God's revelation as changeless. We don't have the logical framework for something that is eternal but not static, because we don't have terminology and categories for things rooted in Eternity reaching out to touch the world in many places and times at once. Yet, this is the meaning of Isaiah's declaration that God's wisdom is the very definition of faithfulness and truth.

The ultimate symbol of defiance against God's revelation on earth was the great city of Babylon. The ancient Tower of Babel never rose again. The Second Babylon was destroyed, and remains a ruin to this day. While Babylon as a name and symbol arose repeatedly throughout history, and may yet rise again, God will smash it each time, until that final end of all things, when it will not rise again in any sense. Abraham dismissed his old urban lifestyle, adopting the nomadic existence that his people despised. In Hebrew culture, the tent-dwelling shepherd is the symbol of a pure life. The only good city was that built by God. While we know Jerusalem was viewed that way, it was merely an earthly symbol of the Eternal City of Heaven. All other cities are the works of man, trying to capture the glory of Heaven without God, and failing. It must ever be so.

God has always been the refuge of those distressed. Under the Law of Moses, it was an obligation to be gracious to such people, to be generous in caring for them. This was God's own nature. Israel as a nation was once a wandering outcast people; they were not permitted to forget caring for outcasts themselves. Israel was meant to be a nation of refuge in God's mighty shadow, the place no heathen hand could harm. The Temple was meant to be a place of joy and celebration, enjoying the finest this world had to offer. It was a symbol of spiritual bounty, the place where people could come for truth, for substantive revelation of what God required of mankind. Once humans got in touch with God, their sorrows could cease and they could walk in light and life. Simply letting this nation host such a place and perform such a service would give Israel all the fame any nation could want.

Because it was not to be in Isaiah's day, at least in the sense that Israel would turn to God and actually live the Law, it must be a promise for some other time. It's not as if God had failed, nor would He ever. It is the people who failed. Thus, there must ever be some far off day of redemption, because it had most certainly not yet come. Yet, for the individual who turned to the Lord, "that day" could always be at hand. The eternal principle of God's power to redeem can reach into our mundane reality in many ways, times and places, because that remains the nature of our God.

If Moab is the problem today, Moab could be dead tomorrow. He who made Moab and raised it up can unmake it. So it would be with any nation that opposed the Lord, including His own. Pride and deceit were manifestations of human wisdom, the best man could do. Not to create anything new, but to twist what God had done in some clever fashion. The Lord could bring the whole thing down to dust in a moment. Anything raised in opposition to God's ways can only fail and fall.

Chapter 26

Still wandering the Eternal Courts in his spirit, Isaiah reports on the sights that meet his eyes there. Here he speaks of that condition when the Lord is actually Lord over His people. Again, this is less a description of some time and place in history, and more about the way things go when God actually reigns. This is what could be if people will cling to the applicable covenant.

Isaiah describes the symbolic City of God. The protecting wall is God's deliverance and only those faithful to Him can enter the gates. The peace that God grants is peace indeed for those who truly desire to please Him. God can build a perfect heart; only what He builds will last. Those who trust in anything else will find everything collapsing under His judgment.

The prophet finds himself lost in this spirit of joy and peace. God is the very definition of good and right and no one can claim that without a commitment to serving Him. Not merely in terms of obedience, as in the Law as written, but with a full desire to please Him. This is the sort of desire that can keep earnest souls awake at night, wakens them before dawn, always seeking to know His desire. An essential element of His desire is to reveal Himself to the world. The human heart is entirely capable of choosing this.

You would think that merely catching a glimpse of God's grace and glory would be enough to change men's hearts, yet it is not. There are some who would live among a whole nation of God's servants, yet still find a way to live in sin. It's as if they cannot see God standing right before them. Yet, in due time, they will surely see when it is too late to repent. It's funny how such people envy God's blessings on His own, burn with a fire to have such an advantage, yet that lust consumes them and lays waste their lives.

Those who belong to God will know peace, if only because He does all the works of peace in them. Every other thing to which a man might devote himself leads to destruction. God alone can make Himself known and deliver us from that bondage by His name. All other gods are imaginary, dead spirits that cannot rise into life, quickly forgotten in His grace. That grace will eventually build a true nation, a true Israel that will glorify the name of Jehovah. That nation will overflow human boundaries.

This brings Isaiah to a moment of bitter confession. His earthly nation of Israel did well to call on the Lord when they were in trouble, but it was about the only time they remembered Him. It seems Israel was always on the verge of bringing forth the witness of God, always in pain and struggling, but never quite delivering that witness. Instead, it was empty, like the wind. The revelation of God never seemed to escape Israel, never touched anyone else in the world.

Still, Isaiah rejoices in knowing that there are a few who truly belong to Him. They will all die, but their bodies will be raised again. Like dew falling on the desert, the seeds hidden in the dust will sprout with the resurrected bodies of the redeemed. At any given time, these redeemed of spirit will be few, and Isaiah calls to them in every generation to set themselves apart – the very image of holiness. By cheerfully facing their earthly demise, they escape the growing evil of the fallen world. It will continue to grow until God's judgment and wrath will wash over the whole earth. All the hidden sins will be revealed in His holy presence. For His beloved ones, this will be a day of rejoicing.

Chapter 27

Continuing his celebration of God's wrath on sin and sinners, Isaiah personifies them as their master, Satan. From the earliest Hebrew literature, the symbol of the dragon, the sea monster or other dangerous reptiles represented Lucifer, the fallen Cherub of Covering. While there is still a sort of terrible beauty in his form, it now represents an unrelenting threat against God's people. All God's acts of wrath and judgment fall on Satan's domain. The implicit warning is to people in Israel who are allowing themselves to be devoured by this Serpent. We can choose to let the Lord chase that Serpent out of our lives or be driven away and destroyed with him.

When sin is judged and lives cleansed, the result is the very choice vineyard of God. This is the resurrected image from chapter 5, purified and producing the fruit intended from the beginning. His presence there is not marked by anger over sin, but a quiet Spirit of Peace. Instead, He directs wrath against those who seek to destroy His Vineyard Kingdom. Do cares of this world hold you? They are devoured by His divine presence. Those who would attempt to ruin His Kingdom by planting such worldly temptations would be offered a chance at God's powerful saving grace. It will be their only chance at peace with God. If they do turn to Him, they will also be planted in His Vineyard Kingdom, rooted in what Israel was meant to be, producing fruit that changes the world.

But earthly Israel has failed. He has punished her, but not nearly so harshly as He punished those He used to punish her. The idea was to cleanse, not kill. She was crushed, but not to powder. More like grain, she was threshed to remove the useless parts. So this cleansing will remove all the habits of heathens, whose stone altars will crumble like chalk and wooden images like ash. Every thing that draws off God's people, dilutes their commitment and faith in Jehovah, will be destroyed.

It will require a complete change in the soul. Not just a change of sentiment as in obeying the Law from fear, but a much more radical cleansing of the heart that removes every element hindering full service to the Lord in faith, the faith of Abraham. Isaiah pictures this as a return to the purity of the nomadic life of Abraham, living in tents. The trappings of high civilization would actually be a hindrance, because it is what man has built. This kind of faith sweeps it all away and returns life to the pastoral existence that finds no value at all in fortresses, but trusts in the Lord for protection.

Like a dead tree, the branches of sin will fall off and become firewood, gathered by women. There is a warning here for those who cling to sin, for they will be destroyed with their sins. These morally dead people have produced nothing of value and have rejected His call to be a Kingdom of Priests. He will have no use for these moral zombies and they will perish in their sins. All the favor He once promised earthly Israel will be forgotten in the New Covenant. Indeed, He will ride a heavy threshing sledge over all Israel and only a few will remain. These will be gathered up as precious grain and will be truly His People in the Spirit.

The people of Israel will be offered one last chance to repent fully and turn in faith to God. Even those exiled in Assyria can return, as well as those whose hearts never really left Egypt and slavery to sin. God will summon all who have spiritual ears to hear His call and return to the Temple – the true Temple in Heaven.

The highly symbolic celebration of deep spiritual truths comes to an end here. What follows are several chapters of more specific condemnations to explain why the nation of Israel will be threshed.

Chapter 28

The Law of Moses was an expansion on the Covenant of Noah. While God's people were bound to the specifications of the Law, it was always something doable, always with a built in margin of error. Moses himself made it clear that the underlying personal commitment to God was more important than the precise observance. It was this substrate of underlying faith that brought the things all men seek, short of spiritual enlightenment. The Law promised prosperity, security, and stability – *shalom*. These precepts reflected the very nature of Creation, how it operated, and how man could lay hold of the best this fallen world could offer.

The Northern Kingdom had long since abandoned these principles. Residual prosperity continued and human wisdom seemed to stave off political wrangling with neighbors, but the internal social stability began crumbling immediately. The ruling class suffered from hubris regarding their prosperity and worldly wisdom, thinking they were the finest example of what mankind could have, the flower of human achievement. They were drunk on their pride. Human wisdom can only reach so far, but not far enough to prevent an even more arrogant and powerful empire from northern Mesopotamia coming to sweep across this little kingdom of Israel like a storm; the flower of Israel's pride would be tromped down. They were the first fruits of summer, ripe for picking and eating out of hand.

Naturally, there were a few people who understood the necessity of clinging to the Law. They knew their true King was Jehovah. By their continued efforts to observe the Law under a political system that militated against Covenant faithfulness, they would lay claim to the promises and be spared. Those who escaped the coming hordes of Assyria would not be random refugees, but the faithful of the Lord who fled at the prophet's warning.

Let not Judah think she shall escape this invasion! They were equally drunk on the hubris of human wisdom, including the priests and prophets. These were supposed to lead the way in teaching the requirements of the Law, of understanding and keeping the Covenant. Instead, they were the bulk of the political party within the ruling class that had forged an alliance with Assyria, paying them tribute to draw them into battle against Israel to the north. In their grand and mature wisdom, they mocked Isaiah as some simplistic rube, prattling with his primitive childlike understanding of this complicated world. Their mocking sounded like oral Hebrew lessons given preschoolers: *tsav la-tsav, tsav la-tsav; kav la-kav, kav la-kav; ze'er shim, ze'er shim* – line upon line, order upon order; a little here, a little there.

But these great wise men failed to understand the depth behind the words of God's revelation. In like manner would they scarcely understand the foreign tongue of the Assyrian invaders, no better than they could understand the Assyrian ways. Since they reject the prophet's words in their own language, they would next hear from God in Assyrian. The ways of *shalom* offered by the Law were repugnant and childish to them, so let them learn from a brutal but intellectual

culture far older than Abraham. Isaiah describes the terms of their punishment in words that sounded somewhat in Hebrew like the mocking childish prattle he quoted.

In making a treaty with Assyria, these brilliant mockers had obliged themselves to Hell itself, as it were. Can men make a deal with Death to be spared? Does Death observe treaties? Isaiah reminds them that the Covenant with God is the very foundation of life, it brings shalom in preventing panic. The appeal to Assyria was a panic move, because Judah could not match the combined forces of Israel and Syria. This was not at all according to the Law, but the Law still stood. All actions outside the boundaries of the Law would be destroyed. Assyria would not keep her word, yet would hold Judah accountable to hers. Indeed, Isaiah promised that Assyria would invade repeatedly; each time Judah would be trampled, just like the flower of Israel.

Their wisdom and political maneuvering would not be sufficient. Like a bed too short, and covers too narrow, they would be cramped and exposed. Instead of David's great victories at Perazim and Gibeon, they would become places of Judah's defeat. Did this seem crazy? It was the same God who stood for His standards of truth when He gave David the victory; it will be the same God standing for the same standards when Judah falls before Assyria. There was still time to humble themselves under those standards, still time for the mockers to repent.

The Law seemed to them childish and silly, something they had outgrown. Did they suppose that God did it all just to make fun of them? Were they not calling God "crazy" for holding them accountable? Isaiah told the parable of the farmer. A farmer does not plow just because he likes to plow. He does it so he can make it ready for sowing. He does not randomly scatter seed, mixing crops, but chooses the best soil and terrain for each crop. Why? Because he pays attention to what happens when he sows year by year and knows how nature works. That's how God teaches – He explains how His Creation operates.

The farmer knows how to harvest his various crops because he has seen what happens. There is no need to innovate, to test and discover every season which techniques work best with each item of harvest. It all has a purpose, as does the Law. Moses did not set forth a riddle; he did not bind God's people to a mind game. These were the very real requirements in order to get along with how God made things to be. Surely Judah's rulers did not think they had suddenly discovered the right way to do things, in the human wisdom of political intrigues, that they could forget the God who brought them out of slavery, who made them a great nation? The great gift of the Law was to allow this one nation, out of all the nations on the earth, to truly understand how things actually work, a divine revelation of how to achieve simply what all men on earth desired.

Chapter 29

It is one thing to walk in the Covenant of Moses, and altogether a different thing to walk in spiritual commitment. The Law of Moses pointed to the higher Law of God. The fundamental spiritual understanding of all things is symbolism. What can be detected by the five senses is not reality, but shadows which are at best symbolic of reality. We are trapped in a fallen world, not at all what God had intended. We are in a nightmare, where death reigns and misery flavors

all our lives until death. Just making the most of this life required Israel walking according to the Law. Rising above it required seeing through the Law as a lens to the higher reality.

Judah refused to understand the Law. She had already begun her departure from faithfulness on that level, by resorting to mere human wisdom, not wisdom from the Word. The leadership had become worldly wise and had placed logical understanding above spiritual perception. Understanding Isaiah's message required a return to the old Hebrew way of looking at things, the spiritual mind, the symbolic logic, the obedience to commands which don't always make sense to human reason. If there was any hope for Judah, it was for them to find their human wisdom an utter failure and return to Moses. Only in full covenant commitment were they in a place to understand the higher, spiritual truth.

We aren't exactly sure what the name *Ariel* means, whether "Lion" or "Hearth of God." All we need to know here is it serves as a nickname for Jerusalem. The residents were culturally faithful to the feasts and various celebrations in their yearly cycle, but not faithful to God. They paid no heed to warnings, so it would be a complete surprise when Assyria invades and lays siege to the city. Since they preferred to wallow in the "dust" of mankind's ways, they would find themselves calling out to God from there. He mocks them with the image of a charlatan throwing his voice in the dust, speaking in a husky, whiny whisper.

But the innumerable troops of this dusty hoard will be also like chaff, for in due time they would fail. Just as suddenly they come upon the unsuspecting Jerusalem, the Lord would suddenly destroy Assyria's army. Though Jerusalem will be ragged and desperate as any refugee from multiple natural disasters, she will survive. This will pass as some vivid nightmare.

Why will they pass through this? It is because Judah is blind drunk on the thrill of discovering mere human logic. The Lord had given them over to it because they refused the warnings of their prophets and seers. They stumbled around in spiritual darkness. The Law has become to them a book sealed, as they no longer stand on the ground by which to understand its spiritual nature and its symbolic logic. They don't have the spiritual authority to see where it leads. Worse, they aren't really Hebrews any more. No one could make sense of Moses even on the level of mere obedience. They practiced some religion vaguely resembling the ways of the Law, but there were precious few who had a clue how to read the Word from the spiritual perspective, to make sense of it even on a practical level.

No, they have a new religion, a new and "deeper" understanding via their human reasoning. Their quaint old tribal God wouldn't understand it. Funny, they lose the symbolic logic of understanding the fallen world, but seem to think of their God as a mere symbol. They have perverted the whole thing, turning it upside down. It's like a clay pot insisting its existence is independent of the potter. Did they think of Jehovah and His claims as primitive, the stuff they tell their kids, as we today tell them of the Tooth Fairy? Then let them parse this riddle: Lebanon soon becomes a grain field, then again becomes regarded as a forest. How do you measure fruitfulness? The spiritual fruit of Judah is nothing and God could easily find a better reception with a bunch of trees; they at least recognize their Creator.

Where the Lord reigns, the deaf will be glad to come and listen to the Word and the blind will turn to His enlightenment. Those who have nothing to lose will celebrate His immeasurable blessings. These will have dismissed human wisdom in favor of a divine spiritual understanding, without which the whole prophecy of Isaiah is a riddle. Those who relish human greatness don't understand at all. They think they are so smart, able to have people thrown in jail for daring to point out their sins publicly. That's not justice; God is justice personified and His ways define justice.

If Judah could return to the faith of Abraham, to that Law of God for which the Law of Moses is but a poor shadow, then they would not need to be ashamed before Him. They would look upon great prosperity and know whence it came, from the gracious hand of God. They would repent of their arrogance. Such people are in a position to learn true wisdom, the way the world works, because they would understand how the Creator designed it.

Chapter 30

As the Covenant of Moses was but an expansion on the Covenant of Noah, applied in the particular instance of the Nation of Israel, both offered worldly rewards for a proper worldly performance. God through Moses claimed that He was the God of the Hebrews, as well as God of all creation and there was no other god. The Hebrew people were unable to absorb this claim. They came to view Him as a quaint fable of their barbaric past, irrelevant to their modern times. While the requirements of the Law were tied directly to Judah's fortunes, they had during Isaiah's ministry convinced themselves that human wisdom was sufficient to bring national security, prosperity, and glory as a people.

Within the royal council was a distinct partisan group that favored alliance with Egypt. This was a continuation of the same bunch that pined for a return to the Nile before they ever set foot in the Promised Land. While that generation died in the Wilderness, their poisonous lusts were never forgotten. In the latter Monarchy Period, those who were just too sure of their wisdom and maturity often overwhelmed the royal court of Judah, but God calls them smart-aleck kids, seeking to return to slavery. For all the troops Pharaoh may have been able to field, when the day of battle with Assyria came, Egypt would sit it out.

Using the beasts of burden retained for crossing the Negev into the Nile Delta, Isaiah paints a symbol of going to all sorts of trouble and expense for nothing. Dodging all the predators, struggling under the loads of tribute and bribes, Isaiah prophetically refers to Egypt as arrogant and lazy. To insure that no one misses the point, God instructs Isaiah to make this a public record of the attitude of Judah's leaders. They are like spoiled brats who would do anything to avoid having to hear any more of the Law, warning the prophets and seers to remain silent, unless they are ready to talk nicely about the planned alliance. If the only talk of God is about obedience to the Law, then He was not to be mentioned again. Their vaunted wisdom would turn into a wall collapsing suddenly; so badly broken would be their plans that no useful pieces could be salvaged for any purpose.

God pointedly reminds them that if they would simply abide by the Law, everything they believed they wanted would be supplied, including making Assyria nothing more than a noisy

nuisance. Instead, they spoke of evacuating in Egyptian chariots, presumably while Pharaoh's troops marched north to fend off Assyria. Well, they would most certainly flee and they'll need the fastest chariots Egypt can offer. Instead of protecting Judah, God would amplify the Assyrian power. Here we see the ancient symbol of battle failure, when the sense of God's protection was withdrawn and fear was taking over the troops. The only thing left would be scattered outposts here and there. Only by God's own mercy would they survive at all.

This contrasts with what they could have had, and would have again, if they would but obey the Law and keep the Covenant. Isaiah conjures up the shining image of Jerusalem at peace, prosperous and healthy. She will pass through hard times, indeed, but could recover if the people would simply choose it. Bring the teachers of the Law back out of retirement. Learn to think in terms of Law, so that you won't have to ask; you'll know what you should do. Cleanse your lives of idolatry and react violently when someone tries to bring idols back.

For only in keeping the social order as prescribed in the Law can they expect God to maintain the natural order, with seasonal rains, bountiful crops, strong and plentiful herds and flocks, and sufficient water running off every hill. The whole world would seem a much brighter place. God would heal all their ills and replace their losses. Or, should they prefer, they can wallow in His wrath. God comes to judge sin and all the nations that ignore His Law for them will be destroyed in their due season. Would Judah prefer to wear the bit and bridle of sin, or would they prefer to see only their enemies so enslaved? It would be so easy for Judah to sit secure, ready to sing the celebration hymns when Assyria falls outside the very gates of Jerusalem. That place would then become a dance floor of victory.

The final image is that of the wide, flat shadowed field just off the south end of Jerusalem. In ancient times, Canaanites would worship their "King" god, Molech, by tossing their children into the arms of his image built on top of a bronze oven. But when Judah obeys the Lord, the only resemblance to that horrific image would be the fire of God devouring Assyrian troops. Will Judah choose right, so this deliverance comes before the plundering march of Assyria, or after?

Chapter 31

The Israelis celebrated at the Reed Sea Crossing, when the Nation of Israel walked across on dry ground, but the cavalry of Pharaoh drowned when the waters returned to the seabed. They composed a song about it. How could they forget?

Yet, they had indeed forgotten, for now the political party favoring alliance with Egypt trumpeted what a mighty army Pharaoh could field against Assyria. But Isaiah reminds them that the same God who drowned the pride of the Nile could handle a few Assyrians, too. Since Judah will not trust God, He would see to it the Egyptians would be smashed again and those relying on Egypt would fall with her.

In ancient times, when lions roamed that part of the world, they would often take a single sheep from the flock. Usually the victim was not dead right away, just injured. Several shepherds would band together against a common threat and chase down the lion now burdened with a living sheep. At some point, it would either be cornered or get tired and stop. The shepherds

would do their best to yell and make noise to scare the lion away from its prey. Only the most determined would actually dare to physically threaten a lion.

God said He would be like a lion. He would defend His own honor like a lion determined to keep its prey. Neither Egypt's mass of chariots nor Assyria's sea of infantrymen would cower Him, any more than a bunch of wimpy shepherds yelling at a lion. Those who clung to God by symbolically clinging to His Temple in Zion would be safe from an enemy hardly capable of more than empty threats.

Or consider how a group of mother birds would defend their nesting ground. They attack from all directions, seeming to come out of nowhere, harassing so fiercely that almost no creature would risk it for just a few eggs or nestling chicks. The Assyrians would never know what hit them. Isaiah uses the term "passing over" – the same word for the annual celebration of Passover, or Sparing. Again, God reminds them of His power displayed in the one event that gave Israel her identity. Just because that was seven hundred years before was no reason to think God had changed.

Isaiah prophesies what would happen during the siege to come. The city would remember whence they came, would purge their city of idols and call on God in sorrow and repentance. Upon the wings of that revival, the Assyrian army would fall in the night. Not by any human hands, not by the swords wielded by soldiers, but by God's own hands. So devastating would God's attack be that the young squires and shield bearers would surrender themselves to slavery under Judah.

Indeed, the nobles would rush back to their home forts, and hide behind the walls. The mere sight of Judah's royal battle ensign would cause them to quake in fear. This is the God who symbolically made His home in the Temple on Mount Zion. Had Judah truly sought Jehovah, Assyria need never come in the first place.

Chapter 32

Isaiah contrasts the Messianic Promise against the prissy worldliness of his day.

Picture a kingdom without politics. That is, the king rules as kings ought to rule, doing what God expects of kings. All of society from top to bottom is drawn with a shimmering ideal. Ordinary men will become a refuge to those in need, to those who suffer abuse. People will have clarity of vision and a desire to hear God's Word. The foolish and timid will be changed.

The meaning of "fool" is clarified as someone who lives fearfully, who does not trust in God to supply according to His promises. Thus, such a person is greedy, unwilling to share God's bounty. The paradox of sinful times is that the worst sinners are called "good men" – identified as those who delight in seeing others suffer, even while they hoard their material blessings. People who cannot treat their stuff as just stuff are people who make the world an awful place to live. Those who are quick to share compassionately their worldly possessions are the citizens of God's Kingdom.

Symbolizing all the worst of society in his day, Isaiah singles out the ruthlessly materialistic women of Jerusalem. Where will their proud and sassy demeanor be when the Assyrians take

all the food grown in the land? Or when drought comes as the punishing hand of God? They will gaze across the devastated farms and vineyards and weep. People will be forced to leave the comfort of the cities to go out and forage for a bare existence. The cities and great buildings will fall into ruin, become overgrown with weeds. This is a grand picture of the spiritual condition of Israel, right up to the time of Christ.

It would end only on that coming future Pentecost, when the disciples gathered to celebrate the coming of Christ's Spirit to His Kingdom on earth. Spiritual fruitfulness will be hard to describe. It will be like a good, wet springtime. The desert itself would bloom. The sense of peace, security and plenty would be the fulfillment of all that shalom symbolized in spiritual terms. People secure in the knowledge of God's favor will have no trouble giving away material goods to those in need, because they have nothing to lose. God will supply more than they could ever use. That is but the manifestation of spiritual bounty, because we can't help seeking someone in need.

Such peace and sense of security is unfazed by natural disasters or the grandest scope of human sin. Because they do not fear, they have no trouble going about the normal business of the Kingdom. Such is the Kingdom of God for which true believers in Israel waited, hoping to see the Messiah.

Chapter 33

Assyria destroyed the Northern Kingdom. Under threat of treating the Southern Kingdom the same, King Hezekiah agreed to a crushing tribute. According to God's law for kings and nations, this should have ended the threat of Assyrian invasion of Judah. However, Sennacherib reneged and invaded anyway. This is the context as Isaiah begins this chapter. It was one thing for Assyria to demand tribute; that was the norm in those days. It's another altogether to break faith, particularly with God's Covenant People. Thus, Isaiah warns that Assyria will suffer even worse treachery.

Then, Isaiah echoes the humble plea Hezekiah would make when Assyria laid siege to Lachish and Jerusalem. When Judah turns to God and clings to the Covenant promises, all threats to the land are threats against God's sovereignty. He will surely rise up and destroy His enemies. When God is lifted up, Zion becomes a place of justice. Wise rulers will lead the people. Even though the prophet uses present tense, it would be wrong to limit his vision to some future Millennial Kingdom. Rather, it is always true: *Whenever* God is duly honored, He acts to protect His honor and glory. The present tense shows that it is always true, not simply some bright vision of a far away future somewhere.

So it was that Hezekiah would act honorably, sending emissaries to the invading Assyrian troops, to ask terms of peace. Had he somehow broken his agreement without knowing it? But Sennacherib was a treacherous man and would send them away in sorrow. This is not merely an attack on the people of Judah, but an attack on nature itself. This attempts to violate the way God said His creation worked. Thus, all the great cities and lands along the path from the Upper Euphrates down toward Jerusalem would express sorrow and revulsion at this violation.

Jehovah would not take this lying down. When aroused, God warned that Assyria could plan all she liked, but it was a waste of time. They would not merely fail, but Assyria would destroy themselves. The news of how the Assyrian army was destroyed in the night before the gates of Lachish would be heard beyond the borders of the Assyrian Empire. God's glory would be noised abroad and the whole world would know there was no other God.

While such may strike fear in the hearts of pagan lands far away, it would also afflict the conscience of those in Judah who had been unfaithful. Would not the same fire devour them, too? Perhaps, but it wasn't hard to understand what it took to avoid that fate. Honest and just men had nothing to fear, men who didn't even want to hear about evil, nor see it. Such people were faithful to the Covenant of Moses and would reap the blessings of its promises: security, safety, and prosperity. Such people had their hearts set on the Eternal Kingdom of Heaven. They did not simply react in terror at the first sign of trouble, but took the time to contemplate ways to face human dread. They would plan how to confront threats, with careful record keeping, tracking resources. These faithful to the Law will not experience the discomfort of hoards babbling in strange languages. All they have to worry about is understanding the Law, written in their own language.

The Covenant Promise would make Jerusalem as peaceful as desert nomads who have stayed in one place so long that they forget their home is a tent easily moved. No part of it wears out from constant striking and raising. If the people were faithful, it would be like a stream, a full river flowing with traffic that does not pass by, but stops. Zion would be the destination of countless supplicants. Jerusalem would become known throughout the inhabited world as the place where God rules. Isaiah hints at a vision wherein the Lord Himself displaces the Law of Moses, by becoming His own supreme Judge, Lawgiver, and King. Why go anywhere else? The ships' rigging would become slack because they would never sail away.

Throughout his prophecy, Isaiah reminds the people of the Covenant promises. Every invader would be driven away, leaving all their possessions as plunder for the people. There would be so much that even the physically disabled beggars of the city would come out and join the fun. Indeed, there would be no diseases. Unlike the current crop of Jerusalem elite, who proudly parade their sins in public, those who humble themselves under the Law would seek and find forgiveness.

This vision was available to Judah right then. It could be gained, not as some far away, sweet by and by, but any day they turn from disregarding the Covenant and obey.

Chapter 34

Edom was more important as a symbol than as an actual enemy. That's not to diminish the evil the Edomites actually did. Their founder was a man completely lacking in spiritual sense, trading his covenant birthright for a meal. The nation refused Israel, their own cousins, passage on the way to Canaan. All during the years of Israel's residence in Canaan, the only time Edom failed to conduct raids on Israel was when Israel conquered them, demanded tribute and garrisoned troops in Edomite cities. Isaiah saw prophetically, at the very end, when Babylon invaded and laid siege to Jerusalem, Edom would cut off their escape and turn them over to the

Babylonians, except for those they sold into slavery. But it's more important to realize they symbolize here the epitome of fallen mankind: Worldly wise, perhaps, but utterly foolish about eternal things.

First, Isaiah draws a picture of the end of the world. All nations will be gathered, summoned as troops to battle. Except there would be no battle, for God cannot be fought. Instead, it will be a horrific scene of judgment. They would be wiped out in one quick, anticlimactic event. Not only the earth, but the angelic hosts will be dismissed, the heavens would be dissolved, rolled back and all things come to an end. Time itself will be shattered and eternity alone will be left, with almost nothing we might recognize.

God's Living Word, like a mighty war sword soaked in blood, will be wielded against all the living. Isaiah runs out of images seeking to depict a bloodbath like no other. In the midst of this, Isaiah names Edom as the symbol of the sin God would judge. Should we take this literally, we would be factually correct, for Edom was promptly destroyed after helping Babylon capture Judah. She nearly disappeared as a nation. However, seeing only that literal end of a single nation would miss the point. Edom symbolizes all that's wrong with the human race. They were strong only when God's people disobeyed His Law. So it is when we fail to walk in His ways, we are "Edomized" – made like Esau who catered to the flesh.

God must judge this hedonism, as with all sins, by the death of His Son Jesus. It was a messy death as we look back upon it. What God finally does in the end will be even messier, but there is no language to convey it. Thus, Isaiah warns us in parabolic language. Quite literally the smoke rose above Edomite cities for days; even now the only thing living in the ruins are wild animals likely to attack humans and domesticated animals. The grassy fields are no more, only desert scrub vegetation, if that. Instead of safe refuge from harm, the Edomite ruins have become the perfect haven for families of wild creatures. This is the appointed end of that place, with its people so nearly destroyed that they could no longer live in that harsh land.

When sin has had its way in a human life, there isn't much left.

Chapter 35

God's wrath comes against sin. In the previous chapter it ended with the worldly soul destroyed. Should the Lord find something He desires in the wreckage, it will be salvaged, remade and turned into beauty. The same destroying army of Babylon pretty much removed Edom from history, but in a sense it rescued Judah, by preserving the best of society in captivity. These would eventually return.

The literal return of Judah to the Land was loaded with promise. In the most concrete sense, we see the Returnees determined to recover, and for a brief time they adhered to the Law with a renewed fervor. Under Ezra and Nehemiah, great things were established. However, they had begun already the steady drift from the ancient Hebrew ways. In just another generation or two, they had lost their way, adhering only to an external form of holiness, barely holding things together until Jesus could come. The Restoration was purely going through the motions, because the reforms did not touch their hearts. They did not love the God of the Covenant, but loved only the trappings of the Covenant.

Thus, the image presented here is a spiritual return, a parable of recovery after the Lord judges sin in our lives. That judgment took place on the cross. For a time, things were fallow and quiet – in literal terms, three days. Then the birth of the New Kingdom comes.

So Isaiah opens this chapter with rejoicing. The land is so very glad to see holy feet returning to tread its ground. Creation itself rejoices when a soul embraces the Lord. What was once dead and dry comes to life. Images of the most beautiful places to visit in Canaan point to such glory and beauty spreading across the whole region. Those lacking the power to make the journey into this new and glorious Kingdom are encouraged to keep plugging away. Whatever we suffer in spiritual renovation is well worth it for the sake of what comes after.

Those who walked in spiritual blindness shall see and those who could not listen to the Spirit would hear. Broken hearts would be mended; mouths that previously had no reason to sing would rejoice aloud. Isaiah pictures spiritual growth as a change in climate, where dry and semi-arid Israel becomes like Eden, which had a high water table. This could hardly be literally fulfilled, which helps us see why it must be taken as a parable.

This new way of life is compared to a path on which the most clueless can find their way. As long as you keep moving, you will reach the glorious end. Nothing can offer any significant threat, because God is our Guide. We see the picture of New Jerusalem, the place you cannot see without singing and rejoicing on the road that takes you there. In contrast to the very real sorrow the Returnees experienced when they saw the puny Second Temple, those who enter into the eternal joy of the Lord will find no disappointment.

Chapter 36

The recurring theme of Isaiah thus far has been a call to trust in God, to return with full faith to the Covenant. He warned that Judah would be ravaged by Assyria, but would at last be saved by God's intervention. To the degree Judah renewed her covenant faithfulness, she would also enjoy the fruits of that salvation. It was all part of the Covenant Blessings: prosperity, health and security from enemies. Here now begins a section where Isaiah narrates the fulfillment of God's promise to destroy Assyria's troops at the very gates of Jerusalem. Scholars note how similar this and next few chapters are to portions of 2 Kings, speculating Isaiah wrote both. This is quite reasonable, given Isaiah's status not only as court prophet but also in the royal administration.

When Sennacherib came to power in about 705 BC, he spent quite some years simply squashing rebellions so common in large empires when there is a change on the throne. He regarded Judah as in rebellion to his rule. Sennacherib's troops worked their way through some 46 forts belonging to Judah, by their own reckoning. While part of the vast Assyrian army was camped around Lachish, the Judean fortress down southwest of Jerusalem, blocking passage to Egypt, the Emperor sent his Chief of Staff with some troops to the City. Sennacherib was saving the best for last, in part because it was better defended than other cities. His Chief of Staff came to warn Hezekiah: As soon as Lachish fell, the army would lay siege to Jerusalem (in 701 BC). As it was, there were some troops already camping outside of Zion.

This official stood near the wall on an open spot, pretty much where Isaiah stood when he accused Ahaz of misleading Judah away from the Covenant some 23 years before. The protocols of the day allowed some of the Judean officials to meet Sennacherib's mouthpiece without threat to either side there before the gate. This was not really an official negotiation, but political grandstanding. The visitors spoke in the common Hebrew of the day, rather than the official diplomatic language of Aramaic. Furthermore, Rabshakeh appeals to the opposition party at court. This is good psychological warfare, calculated to bring despair.

The Rabshakeh wonders aloud what makes Hezekiah think that he can withstand the coming siege. He repeats the warnings Isaiah made about trusting Egypt to carry out their promises to war effectively against Assyria, or even tie up her troops. The picture of Egypt as a poor, splintering reed claiming to be a strong staff is quite apt.

The great mistake Rabshakeh makes is to blaspheme Jehovah. It is not from ignorance that he speaks of the reforms of Hezekiah. The scholars in Assyria had long known the details of the Mosaic Covenant, and knew quite well that the Canaanite variations on Baal bore only a superficial resemblance to ancient Hebrew worship of Jehovah. They knew Jehovah did not tolerate this mixing of rituals, of multiple altars all over the place, all of which had long been used for other gods. However, the Rabshakeh knew religion and politics were deeply mixed, that there was a strong party in the Judean court disaffected by Hezekiah's destruction of those scattered altars. Quite frankly, those altars were also a source of revenue and that would obviously add to the anger of those whose favorite altar was destroyed. The Rabshakeh's choice to mock this zeal of Hezekiah is a direct insult to Jehovah and he knew that.

Then he compares relative military might. It is no secret that Assyrian troops outnumbered anything Hezekiah might have drafted from within the kingdom. There is an unsubtle reference to Egypt as a primary source for chariots and horses. Assyria had picked up where the ancient Hittites left off, raising their own stables and producing even better chariots. He finishes with reminding them of the half-truth that Jehovah had sent them to conquer the land, so there was no point resisting.

Hezekiah's officials wanted to keep this a discussion among bureaucrats in the Aramaic tongue, but the Rabshakeh makes clear he came to spread fear. He shouts loudly to the guards on the wall, knowing that many of their senior commanders would be there to hear. He attempted to provoke discussion of terms of surrender with them, bypassing the official delegation. He made all sorts of wild promises about a better land. He mentions all the patron deities that had failed to protect their various domains in the empire. Naturally, the guards on the wall knew better than to answer.

However, it was not the fine discipline of the Judean army that made the difference here. It was how Hezekiah responded.

Chapter 37

What Isaiah records here is not a precisely chronological account. Rather, it dramatizes and compresses the events of some years. We recall that Hezekiah had sinned and made an alliance with Egypt, only slightly more trustworthy than Assyria. Assyria had shown herself capricious,

taking tribute and offering peace only to invade and destroy anyway. Historically, we believe Assyria's troops invaded twice, but this is not certain. At some point Hezekiah attempts to buy them off, but later Sennacherib is implacable. Isaiah indicates the latter, partially successful invasion that destroyed most of the fortified cities of Judah was punishment for Hezekiah's failure to trust in God alone.

We aren't exactly sure of the chronology. It would appear that the Assyrians lifted the siege of Lachish to take down Libnah first, a few miles north of Lachish. That would typically mean leaving a token presence at Lachish to keep it under siege, while moving that bulk of attack troops to Libnah, likely because it was ready to fall after a smaller siege force held it. The Assyrian troops seldom moved as a single unit at all times. For example, the delegation that came to visit brought a substantial number of troops, so didn't move quickly. They got word Lachish was on hold and operations had moved to Libnah, so left to join this last action before returning to Lachish where God struck them.

Even before they left, Hezekiah's officials visited Isaiah in sackcloth and ashes, a sign they were ready to face whatever God had decided. They had done all they could do on a human level and it hadn't helped. What did God have in mind? Isaiah replied with an assurance that God could handle Sennacherib and would plant in his mind a spirit of unease about things back home in Nineveh. He would die there without returning.

So the Assyrians left for the attack on Libnah. At the point when they learn that Egypt was marching north to meet them, Sennacherib writes a letter to Hezekiah. He warns in most blasphemous terms that no god could stop him and that Hezekiah and his people should simply abandon Jehovah. Hezekiah very wisely bypasses any intercessor and goes directly to God in the Temple. He symbolically delivers the letter to God, showing how this Gentile was blaspheming His Name. Hezekiah confesses there is no other god, that Jehovah stood alone as the sole deity of the whole universe.

Isaiah notifies Hezekiah of God's response. This proper expression of humility gave God room to act. Isaiah composes dramatic poetry describing the difference between willing and forced humility. Hezekiah prostrated himself before God; Sennacherib would be prostrated by force. All of his boasting was just noise, not even equal to the wind that God could blow. All the violence Sennacherib had done to others would be brought home to him. He had taunted Jehovah; those who trusted Jehovah would taunt Assyria as she fell.

Then Isaiah prophesies what life would be like soon. This warfare had lasted from spring through autumn, raiding the crops and disrupting the agricultural cycle. As many as could had already fled inside the walls of Jerusalem. Assyria's troops would be gone soon and the people taking refuge in Jerusalem would fan out and rebuild, eating the crops that naturally sprang up after a wasteful hasty raiding harvest from the invaders. Then the next year there would be sufficient growth from wild and accidental crops to survive well enough. The third year they would be able to return to their previous agricultural practices. This would all serve to confirm the wisdom of trusting in God alone to treat His own people differently from all other nations when they cling to the Covenant.

The final verses indicate Sennacherib never got around to laying full siege to Jerusalem. The miraculous plague that struck down his encamped army happened in the shadow of Lachish. He retreated with what was left back up the way he had come, along the coastal highway north through Lebanon. Some twenty years later Sennacherib's own sons assassinated him while at worship in his palace.

Chapter 38

Isaiah was not a historian, but a prophet. He arranged his material to warn Israel; telling the story was merely a device for that warning. Thus, the narrative material for this chapter precedes chronologically the previous two chapters. We have no way of knowing the exact time frame, but it seems safe to guess the Assyrian siege was at least ten years after this narrative.

Some physical affliction took Hezekiah and it was apparent that it would be fatal. Isaiah confirmed those fears. This was surprisingly early for a righteous king to die and Hezekiah said so. Notice he does not claim to be perfect, but to have cared deeply what Jehovah thought about things. The most important point in that culture and time was for Hezekiah to be loyal to his Lord. This would have been his sole basis for such an appeal.

The Lord grants this request. He sends Isaiah back with the message that reminds Hezekiah the grant is tied to the king's effort to replicate the service of his ancestor, King David. Those fifteen years guaranteed he would see the Assyrian siege and its end. This was a package deal, since saving Jerusalem did not necessarily require Hezekiah's safety.

It's a waste of time trying to analyze the sign God granted. We have no idea what the Sundial of Ahaz was, nor how it worked in terms of the gradations. The words are ambiguous, as is typical of the Hebrew language. People living when Isaiah published this would know, but that wasn't what really mattered. Nor does it help to debate how it might have happened, whether it was an atmospheric effect or the earth slipping retrograde for a period. It would be just as easy to reset the time itself. A God who can create all things can surely do as He pleases with that creation regardless of our understanding. All we need to know is that Hezekiah and those near him at the time saw it, the intended audience.

Equally difficult is Hezekiah's poetic praise response. He uses various images we can recognize. Sheol is not Hell, but simply Death. This is not a theological statement, but a hymn of praise. It starts out very sad: no longer seeing living men, like a piece of fabric folded or rolled up, painful as being eaten by a lion, crooning and moaning like any number of animals. He can't claim anything, but rejoices in the mercy of God. All men live by that mercy. Whatever sin he committed (perhaps his alliance with Egypt) was forgiven, according to the Law. He notes that dead people cannot praise God on the earth, a statement that continues to have powerful meaning today, if we remember that this is under the Law of Moses, not a spiritual assessment.

Finally, it would do little good to theorize how the fig poultice might indicate the nature of the illness. In this case, it was surely symbolic, since we know of no medicinal quality, even in alternative medicine, for such a thing. Rather, it is best to see this as pointing out the fruitfulness of Israel being extended just a while longer, given that the fig tree is a traditional symbol for Israel. Since it was his son, Manasseh, who succeeded Hezekiah, and whose 55-year reign was

the last straw in idolatry, this grant from God put off that evil time for a while. After Manasseh, Judah's doom was sealed and Josiah's life cut short so that the Exile could commence on schedule. It was the Exile that Isaiah sets up in this narrative, which continues in the next chapter.

Chapter 39

Babylon was for some time a subordinate kingdom of Assyria. As one of the more powerful cities, Babylon had a very ancient history in religion and learning going back too far to trace today. By Isaiah's day, the ruling class was of the same ethnic stock as the Syrians who ruled from Damascus, the Arameans. We have no idea whence they arose, but their ancient migrations and settlement policies are well established. In the broad scattering of Semitic tongues dominating that part of the world, Aramean was one of the closest to Hebrew.

Keep in mind that Hebrew was originally identical to Aramean (also known as Chaldean) as spoken by Abraham. During the following generations, both before and after the sojourn in Egypt, the Nation of Israel absorbed the Canaanite tongues, also a branch of Semitic similar to Aramaic. Thus, the Hebrew of Moses is more Canaanite than Mesopotamian. The language of Assyria and Babylon was rather like a more ancient Hebrew. During the Captivity in Babylon, the Hebrew people again absorbed the ambient tongue, and the Restoration saw them once more using Aramaic, referring to it as "Hebrew" in the time of Christ.

It is this Babylonian Captivity that Isaiah seeks to explain in this chapter. Note that the narrative is virtually identical to 2 Kings 20:12-19, which tells us a lot about the sources for 1&2 Kings. This passage sets up critical elements in the story of how Judah declined until destroyed. The relatively mild arrogance of Hezekiah becomes a much bigger attitude problem contributing to the ultimate failure of Judaism as a whole.

What was the mission of the Nation of Israel? God says she was to be a "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:5-6) – a whole nation that brings the revelation of God to the world. He was not merely God of Israel, but God of all humanity. This was part of the inherent promise to Abraham: "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). They lived to present to the earth a model of what God demanded of all nations in terms of the Covenant of Noah. They were to reach out with a message of clarity, calling all mankind to obey their Creator.

Instead, Hezekiah lived and acted as if Judah was somehow better than the rest of the world, a focus on the privilege and not the duty. He hoped to show this by a superior use of the world's ways, particularly in use of statecraft. Merodach-baladan (Babylonian: *Marduk apla-iddin* – "Marduk grants a son") seized power over the Babylonian province in about 722 BC, at about the time Shalmaneser V of Assyria died after a short reign. Sargon II accepted Merodach as the new vassal of Assyria. Later Merodach was a major leader in a wider revolt in about 713 BC, and was defeated in battle, taken prisoner and deposed in 710. When Sargon died around 705 BC, Merodach regained his throne in a couple of years and led a fresh revolt before finally dying in about 701 as Sennacherib was pacifying the Assyrian Empire. This makes it hard to discern just which of these two periods saw Merodach sending envoys to Hezekiah. In the broader sense, it

won't matter too much. Sennacherib's invasion was due in part to his awareness of this friendship, however shallow, between Merodoch and Hezekiah.

Merodoch had been seeking an excuse to send envoys to Judah, and Hezekiah's near-death illness made the news in Babylon. Upon this, his servants carried the pretty words of Merodoch's court and Hezekiah let it go to his head. He didn't show them Scriptures and tell them about Jehovah, who had granted the royal wealth and survival of Judah against Assyria so far. Instead, he acted the fool and showed off the royal treasures as his personal pride.

Isaiah's rebuke on the surface pointed up Hezekiah's pride and joy as the primary reason Babylon would some day return to take all that stuff. However, there is something subtler at work here. Hezekiah suffered enough from false national pride, but the later survival of the Assyrian siege only made it worse. The entire kingdom somehow got the false idea that God would hold His City and Temple untouchable, and that He would protect them unconditionally. Snug and smug in their safe nest, the national leaders refused to believe the warnings that God would allow invaders to destroy His Temple, making the task of Jeremiah and other prophets of that day very hard, indeed.

Isaiah's warning about Babylon fell on deaf ears, as Hezekiah selfishly figured his own eyes would see no sorrow.

Chapter 40

In terms of chronology, the Assyrian threat is past and Babylon is yet to come. However, Isaiah feels the conquest and exile as a present and painful reality in his spirit. Starting in chapter 40, he seeks to prepare the hearts of those who will see it firsthand. More importantly, there is a deeper spiritual message. While Judah does learn from the Exile, they lose more than they gain. Well before the Return and Restoration the foundation was laid for a complete loss of the spiritual viewpoint as they lapsed into a very superficial and worldly form that we know as Judaism. The visions in these chapters range all over the time-line, to include portions that prefigure John's Apocalypse.

It is doubtful that Isaiah knows or cares when the various visions are fulfilled. The poetic imagery weaves together a vast collection of threads to provide a tapestry of what God wants to do. The spiritual viewpoint pays little heed to such concerns as time and place. Isaiah sees the hand of God at work, revealing His ways to a people who reject those ways. These are the same people who were given the most clear understanding of His ways for mankind and were in the best position to perceive where this all pointed to in Eternity. They not only rejected His ways on earth, but also closed the door for those to whom they were supposed to reveal them. The tragedy and sorrow of the Exile is outweighed by the tragedy of a nation preferring the world to Eternity, and how it would be such a long and tortuous path to the Messiah they would also reject. The Babylonian siege in the near term was the least of the nation's worries.

The only comfort for this nation will be the sense of restoring peaceful loyalty to their God. The work of the Spirit is to soothe the frustration and calm the fear of walking in service to a God who so perplexes us in our fallen minds. Israel had a double portion of God's revelation and would be held accountable to a higher standard. It's possible the nation could learn from all this

and could be following God through the miles of wilderness separating Babylon from Jerusalem. Thus, the Return could be a genuine homecoming, glorious as the passage through the wilderness of Sinai, when God Himself made the path open by His divine presence. So crossing the sea would pale in comparison to a smooth highway across several hundred miles of scrub desert and rocky highlands. But that image symbolizes the demand God makes for His people to be reshaped for the coming of His Son.

If people could only realize this world is but a shadow of Eternity! Isaiah is called upon to cry out this truth. Nothing in this world is worthy of our concern. God will gladly help us realize that by wiping away all our fretful plans; indeed, whole nations will be wiped away. What matters is not human existence, but the revelation of God. If we could embrace His glory as far more precious than life, then we would understand and sorrow would recede into the distance. God granted Zion as the place from which that Word would proceed. Israel was instructed how to do this, but refused.

So it is that God will do it for Himself. His own Son would come like a shepherd. This Shepherd would be the same One who laid out Creation with the measures of His hands. He is the one who defines what is right and just. Nothing on this earth could suffice to give Him His due. Can any other compare to Him? Can anyone produce a likeness glorious enough? No, it's all shoddy and cheap by comparison. We can produce nothing worthy of Him; no power on earth can rival Him. Like seed dropped in the sand in a dry land, the wind of God's Spirit could blow away whole nations. We cannot even count the stars He knows by name.

For the Jews to think God pays no attention to their secret counsels is too silly for words. To complain that God isn't giving us our due is arrogance on a scale unimaginable. We are so far beneath Him; perhaps that explains why so many refuse to acknowledge Him as their One True Ruler. How sad, for those who come before Him with proper reverence will see His glorious revelation and know His power. The hardiest men on earth will hardly be in the same league as the servant whom God empowers. Indeed, their spirits will soar above eagles, as their loyalty will see them through every trial.

Chapter 41

During Isaiah's lifetime, heathen idolatry had resurged more than once. In some cases it might be seen as little more than a political reaction to royal reforms, but it has always been hard to separate politics and religion in that part of the world. Clearly, in God's eyes it made a difference, for typical political maneuvering was seldom condemned for its own sake, but straying from His Law was never acceptable. Having a political motive was no excuse.

The Mediterranean coastlands represent all Gentile heathen nations, but those far away in particular. In this case, they are a proxy for the various deities claimed in those lands. God calls on them to meet Him in court, where He sits as Judge. While scholars insist that Isaiah refers here to Cyrus of Persia as rising from the north and east, just about every ancient empire (except Egypt) came from east of Palestine, typically attacking from the north, following the Euphrates up where it comes near the Syrian coast. Further, the Lord had accurately prophesied of Assyria and Babylon coming to dominate Palestine in turn, so Persia is just one more. No pagan deities

managed to prophesy these things before they happened. Did they take notice? Of course not, but the Gentiles encouraged each other to invest more heavily in new images of their various gods.

Judah had no excuse for joining this madness. The God who chose them was the Creator of all things. Theirs was the only real God and His divine favor was very real. When other nations dared to rise without God's calling, they were crushed and forgotten. It mattered not a whit how great and powerful they were, especially compared to little Israel. It was not Israel's greatness, but the greatness of the God of Israel who could make them able to face any empire.

God pays close attention to the most needy on earth. If they call on Him, nothing they need is too hard for Him – rivers in the desert, enough water to grow a massive forest, anything is possible with God. Indeed, His people would be like a massive forest growing along the banks of ancient rivers of His revelation.

So let these proud nations bring their deities to court. Let them prove they are real gods by a record of prophecies, such as the rise of Assyria and Babylon. Let them compare with His direct promise that there will be a Persian Empire. Or let them even fully explain Creation. No, they cannot, but are simply chunks of human artwork.

So let's be precise. There will be an empire arising far to the east (Persia) which will, indeed, call upon the God of Israel. The conquering ruler will treat mighty kings like piles of wet sand and clay. No other deity predicts this. Let's see if it happens. Indeed, it did, for Cyrus of Persia was aware of Israel's God and gave Him credit by name. He had promised to set Israel free from the Babylonian captivity. So why is it that no one in Jerusalem will now embrace this message by faith? Why do they cling to other messages from false gods and ignore the message of their own? All these imported gods are a waste of decorative materials in Zion.

Chapter 42

This passage is one of many "Servant Songs" in Isaiah. Let no one forget that the original intention was for Israel to be the good servant of Jehovah, bringing His Laws to men with a level of clarity otherwise not possible. The Covenant of Moses was the clearest revelation yet of what God requires of mankind. In Israel alone would any find such a clear example of what it meant for a nation to be lawful before the Lord.

Thus, we see a symbolic servant whom God has chosen and empowered. The image is symbolic simply because, for too much of its history, Israel refused to be that servant. So through Isaiah, God holds forth the image of what could be. He would reveal what justice means to the Gentile nations. He won't be pushy or demanding, because it's not necessary. Truth makes its own path, so the servant of God can simply walk in purity and obedience. He will bother nothing and nothing will bother him.

Foreseeing that Israel would finally fail to be this servant, God must prepare a Servant who will fulfill the Law. Jehovah, even as He allowed the nation of Israel to choose death, preserved her long enough to give birth to His Son. The Covenant of the Law would fail because there would be no one obeying it. His own Son would come and fulfill the Law and formally close the

Covenant. Then He would Himself become a living New Covenant for all humanity. He would change everything. Since Israel kept returning to idols, both the standard man-made religious shrines and the idols of the mind and heart, so these things will pass away, and something entirely new would come.

We should understand that even the most bracing translation of praise into English is a poor substitute for Isaiah's soaring imagery drawn in the Hebrew tongue. People all over the world would begin praising the Name of God. For a long time, He will wait until that praise can be born. When the time was due, it would be painful for Him, indeed. He would have to destroy much of what He hoped to offer Israel. Instead, it would be one long disaster, trailing off into history, as the nation is destroyed because it prefers strange, man-made gods.

The Lord's first servant, Israel, is so much like those idols. They cannot see the truth, cannot hear the Word. Isaiah pictures Jehovah as One who almost can't wait to bring forth His True Servant. He would restore the true meaning of the Law; He would restore the Law to its proper place in the Created order. As for Isaiah's days, the people seemed to have never even understood what treasures they held, what freedom was theirs, how powerful they could have been. No, they are robbed, in prison and chased as prey. No one can deliver them, for it was they who were supposed to deliver others.

Would Israel hear the warning? Do they not know that they have forced God's hand to turn them over to Satan for torture? Their safety was in the Law, but they chose the slavery of disobedience. Still, with all the prophesied punishments, He knew the nation would never respond – not really. Superficial changes may come from time to time, but it will never stick. He could set a fire all around the nation, but the people would hardly know until their own flesh was smoking.

Chapter 43

We might say that the only thing standing between Israel and the destruction for which their sins so loudly call is the sovereign determination of God to accomplish His purpose. Israel will be dragged along as the nation of God's revelation whether they like it or not.

So while Israel little heeds God's punishment for their disloyalty, He is determined to protect them for His own sake. Be aware that this is more about God's nature than about specific Israeli history. This is how God operates and Israel simply is the object in this case, not the subject. Christians rightly see in this chapter promises for those in the Kingdom of Heaven, symbolically described for those in the Kingdom of Israel. For the sake of His own revelation, He will fend off every natural and man-made threat to His purpose in Israel. He destroyed other nations so she might be free and prosper. When the time comes, He can easily force Creation itself to hasten Israel's return from dispersion across the earth. This is not meant as some concrete promise to be taken literally, but an expression of God's nature. It applies to Israel the Mission, even if Israel the Nation rejects it.

Naturally, the only reason God persists in this is because He wants the rest of the world to have a fair chance to see His glory, to know Him and His Laws, to hear His claims on their loyalty as God. Let them compare their gods to Jehovah. Israel is the proof God is the only God, because

He protects His mission, which sometimes means protecting this nation in spite of their sins. However, this is not to let them off lightly; of all nations, Israel knows full well the depth of their betrayal, because she alone truly understands God. He won't tolerate her adultery with other gods, because they aren't real.

In days to come, He will humble Babylon for His glory's sake. Judah's departure from Mesopotamia will be like a fresh Exodus. Just as Israel left Egypt by a dry path in the sea, the same sea that destroyed their pursuers, so they will leave Babylon all but forgotten. Indeed, fresh new miracles will attend their Return. He will Himself build the road, ensure sufficient water is available and provide all the other comforts necessary for the journey. Yes, He would gladly do these things.

But His people won't bother to acknowledge Him. Have they simply grown tired of Him? Instead of freewill love offerings, they have brought Him sorrow. So let them meet Him in court. Let them explain why they have not observed the Covenant they swore on blood to uphold. Where has God fallen short? What justifies this neglect? Nothing. Israel has sinned from the beginning. Even the priests, those particularly called to keep the Covenant before the people, have also sinned. For this reason, He will allow the heathens to enter His own Temple. The people will find no protection in His Temple if they profane it themselves.

Chapter 44

God's plans are unconditional; that's the meaning of "sovereignty." His promises do not depend on anyone but Himself. The promises of the Law stand as long as the fallen earth exists. However, those promises cannot be claimed and appropriated unless we go where they stand. The word "confession" is a reasonable translation of the languages in the Bible manuscripts, but only as we recognize it's original roots for English: *to stand with*. Thus, only as we confess our God – stand with Him on matters of His declaration – do we stand where His promises stand. His plans are to give those promises, but Israel refuses too often to stand with God where those promises can be found. Israel removes herself from God's plans, so He will make a New Israel. It may well be, from Isaiah's perspective, the Israel that goes into exile, then returns, can choose to be that new Israel. If she still refuses to take the vestments of that office, it awaits another to fulfill it. Someone will inherit the blessings of the covenant, whether they are literal progeny or spiritual.

So despite the necessity we saw in the previous chapter of destroying the Temple, Israel still has another chance to accept her role in God's divine plan. Somewhere, some day, there will be an Israel who is *Jeshurun* – Upright. It remains at least once more her choice to be that Israel. The Spirit of God would be poured out upon whomever accepts this vestment, but it will surely not be the generation of Isaiah, so perhaps a later one. He looks for whoever takes upon themselves the full manifestation of God's revelation and holiness, clearly and utterly loyal as the property and servants of the Lord.

Who is this Lord? In the early days of the Nation of Israel, the depth of cultural immersion in their times made it well nigh impossible to swallow the notion of there being only one deity, One True God. But this is some 700 years later and there is no longer any excuse for it. Of all the

various pagan deities, not one could claim to have foretold the future accurately. Indeed, a wise man might guess what will come tomorrow on a broad scale, if he has enough information. However, God has declared in advance things that no man could expect. He said He would dry the sea floor for Israel to cross, and then did it. He said He would feed them in a land that could scarcely support a small clan, much less the million plus marching under Jehovah's banner. God's claims are the only ones that come true, simply because He is the one who makes them happen.

We can be sure the ancient pagans did not necessarily believe their images were the actual gods themselves, but a point of focus. They weren't so primitive as to be utterly animist, at least in the ANE. However, God said there were no others, so it might as well be the idols that were the gods themselves. Thus, we have this comical satire of men calling out to a chunk of material that required the help of a skilled craftsman to turn it into a god. Indeed, a man would cook his food and warm his body from one half a log and with the other half he has to work long and skillfully to make the god to which he kneels. Oh, what a mighty god that is! What a tragic figure is the man who cannot see what a fool he makes of himself that way.

Unlike that sort of deity, the wild imagining of a fearful man who makes his own god, Jehovah has made His people, Israel. There is but one purpose for redeeming Israel from slavery: That the whole earth would resound from their witness of His glory. All Creation waits, standing by to support the songs of praise Israel should be singing right now. Should Israel but obey the Covenant, every idolater would be shown for the silly babblers he is. Every Israeli would be shown the wise and unopposable force for revelation, making that nation unassailable on the earth. Would she remain faithful, her land would become like Eden, the Paradise Garden of God. In her path returning from Babylon, He would smooth the mountains, dry up every water barrier. This is the God who calls by name Cyrus of Persia before he is born, making him the servant of God to release His people from captivity. He will order and fund the rebuilding of Jerusalem to even greater glory than before, Temple and all.

This was the offer standing long before Judah was ever carried off by Babylon. This is the offer she began to accept. Yet, as history shows, and the Word itself, she never quite claims that garment of holiness, that vestment of greatness as God's revelation on earth. It waited One who would come much later to fulfill all things.

Chapter 45

Parable is the language of Heaven among men. It takes a peculiar kind of silly literalism to miss what Isaiah says of how God operates. Cyrus, not yet born when this was written, foreshadows the Messiah. What God plans for Cyrus to do is symbolic of how the Messiah will operate spiritually when He comes.

Cyrus was anointed by God to subdue the nations of the Babylonian Empire, plus a little extra. Because God chose him, no armor could save his foes; no depth of hiding would keep plunder from his reach; no fortification would keep him out. God will do this and nothing man could dream up would frustrate God's plans. To ensure everyone has no excuse for doubting this,

God makes much of predicting him by name. God's greatest blessing to His Creation is revealing Himself.

Just as God orders rain from the sky, He can also order Gentile rulers to bring about His brand of justice. A confused understanding via pagan religion is no barrier to God using anyone; He can speak any way He wishes. To some degree, the Persians did manage to obey the Covenant of Noah, far better than any previous empire in that part of the world. But it's foolish for any living being to suggest that he might have grounds for evaluating what God does, to dispute God's choice through whom He will work. As surely as God rules the heart of every man, by the same hands that laid out the pattern of the universe, he will direct Cyrus to restore the City of Jerusalem and the Temple. Further, it will require no bribery – and it did not, since Cyrus was deeply concerned with having the good favor of Jehovah.

If it were necessary, God could reverse everything done to Israel in the past. The slavers of Egypt would send slave labor to Judah. Such men would willingly come as their just recognition of Jehovah as God alone. What many would miss is how God pokes at Judah for her increasingly unfaithful response to His clear revelation to the Nation of Israel. If the Sabeans could know there is only one God and desire to serve in rebuilding His Temple, why do the current Israelis, with their far more complete revelation, fail to be faithful? Isaiah then adds his own voice, proclaiming that there is no other God and all too soon Judah will be deeply ashamed for her idolatry. If Israel is to be saved, it will be by the miracle of God's divine grace, but only to those who are loyal to Him.

Isaiah reminds Israel that she was made a nation by God's power, not her own greatness. The Land was a gift to her, for she hardly could claim to have fully driven out the awful Canaanites. She did not work for it; much less did she make it. God did not hide His revelation; Israel hid it from her sight. This was not some big joke on the nation when God commanded her to seek His face. He has not failed; Israel failed. Should the heathen nations come before God to argue against Him, it would be an easy case to win in court. By implication, why would Judah so foolishly then adopt those same non-existent deities?

While He would keep the door open for a time, in the end the Nation of Israel would cease to exist. Instead, the Gentiles from the whole world would come eagerly to be His people. Whether sooner or later, all humanity must acknowledge Him as Lord. Would it not make more sense to embrace the Lord faithfully now? Indeed, many Gentiles would do just that. At that time, Israel would cease to be anything special and could find God's favor only by joining those other nations.

It should be obvious that the intent was to provoke Judah to jealousy, stirring up a justified fear that her special standing with Jehovah would come to an end. This threat comes in the context of noting that Cyrus would be like the Messiah in some ways, hinting at how the true Messiah would take His message to the whole world, since Israel would reject it.

Chapter 46

Before Babylon ever really amounts to much, Isaiah warns of her primary weaknesses. Like most pagan kingdoms, the Babylonians had a raft of deities and demigods. As empires came

and went over that Cradle of Civilization, the Mesopotamian Valley, the names and apparent identities of gods also came and went. It contributed to Babylon's fame as the world center of the study of religions in ancient times. Her scholars could accurately assess what each god of the many nations demanded in various settings. Thus, Balaam was able to assist Moab regarding Israel's God during the last march toward Canaan Land before the Conquest under Joshua. Canaan called their chief deity *Baal*, which is more a title than a name, meaning "Lord" – the same word people used to address the head of household, or any superior person. The Babylonian spelling of that word was *Bel*, which they considered the god of lower atmosphere (weather) and the dry land.

Bel was said to have a son, *Marduk*. His son was *Nebo*, Bel's grandson. Nebo was the patron god of science and academia. With the vast legacy of centuries of royal support for academia in Mesopotamia, Nebo was a major deity. It could easily be a Babylonian saying: "Knowledge is power." Babylon pioneered the use of scholarship in war, knowing so well the details of their enemies' lifestyles and gods. Even today the psychological effect on troops of targeted propaganda is recognized.

Jehovah was not impressed with these deities. It was symbolic language to describe them as bowing and scraping to Him. He goes on to say that they are actually nothing but hardware on which people lavished attention. Compared to Jehovah, who not only predicts the future, but also controls it personally, these two famous deities of Babylon did nothing at all. You would think by now that the people of Judah would have gotten this message. Isaiah rubs it in, over and over. That's because they did not get it. From the very beginning, even during the Exodus itself, they carried pagan deities. The very idea that there was but one God alone was simply too foreign culturally. For all the scholars' knowledge, this was the primary weakness of Babylon. Since Judah continued to act as if there were other gods out there, there is a certain justice to letting them be conquered and exiled by a nation which knew the name of every deity mankind had ever worshiped.

Today we are less obvious about it. Yet we have easily as many false gods as Babylon and equally the weakness exhibited by Judah. We keep turning to other things in our lives to which we invest our ardor and loyalty. We allow a host of activities to intrude on our proper service in the Kingdom. Sure, Judah returned from Exile without ever again raising another idol before God. Yet, they were forever raising up a false image of their own God. We are hardly any better today.

Chapter 47

God compares the future Babylonian Empire with a wife of royalty – pampered, demanding and arrogant. God tells her the royal finery will be taken away; she will sit on the ground naked. She will be both widowed and bereft of children.

We know from history that Second Babylon (the city of the Tower was the first) lasted a mere three generations or so as the primary imperial power of the Ancient Near East. With each succeeding conquest in the Mesopotamian Valley claiming the vast literature archive of the previous civilizations, plus new additions with new patrons, this formed the core of pride. Here

was the epitome of civilization, all that man had ever achieved and presuming to be all that man could achieve.

This treasure trove of materials included all the most ancient magic texts they could find. Scripture does not deny that there is power to be found in the dark corners of Hell. Yet God makes it clear that it has no power over Him. With the centerpiece of Babylonian religion based on the more ancient Tower culture of astrology, there was little the stars could do to foresee or prevent God from fulfilling His promise to Israel. So weak was it that God compares it to a fire of stubble: Flaring very bright and hot for a moment, it quickly burns out leaving foul ash and no coals.

This was part of the image John had in mind in Revelation. The spirit of Babylon rises quickly, but has nothing behind it. All the glittering promises of comfort and ease, of great beauty and power, evaporate quickly when the time comes for the wrath of God to fall. Nations that adopt the path of Babylon cannot fulfill any part of God's Laws for Nations. Once that path is taken, the end comes rather soon.

Every generation sees one or more nations rising to great empire status, projecting their power far beyond their own borders. The power is based on feverish commerce. Their trade is not the honorable provisions for life, but appeals to sinful lusts – hedonistic pleasures, entertainment, luxuries and a host of over-valued trifles. It lives off the backs of other peoples in other lands, producing nothing of real value itself. Instead, it becomes a bottomless pit, consuming all things. Worst of all is the trade in human flesh, the oppression and treatment of people as mere assets.

The nation that follows the path of Babylon does not live long.

Chapter 48

The Law of Noah was for all nations. Any nation hoping to gain the fullest advantage of what God could do to bless them would adhere to that ancient covenant. However, of all the nations in history, God chose Israel for a unique national covenant. While the Law of Moses was expansive and precise, it was founded on Noah. But it was most certainly different and Israel alone was offered this unique opportunity of having things handed to them on a silver platter, instead of long and deep study by a hoard of scholars piecing together knowledge of Jehovah from unnumbered scraps of revelation. Israel was a nation that knew God differently, uniquely.

God also knew they were uniquely hard hearted. For all the ease with which they could know God's ways, could be made pure enough to come before His earthly Presence in the Tabernacle and Temple, they would turn out to be more faithless than all other nations. While they invoked the name of their God, they clung to their idols. Let them hear His message to them.

He knew before He chose them they would be unfaithful. He knew that He would have to hand them over to Babylon. He knew it before Moses was born. So He waited until they were still about a century out from it, and then warned them specifically that a nation rising from the ashes of ancient Babylon of Nimrod would come and take them away. The warning came way before any demon masquerading as a god could lie to them, still long enough for them to

actually have time to forget, if they refuse to hear. Yet He would personally see to it that the Exile would come. No mere idol could do that. He revealed that and much more, but waited until the time of Isaiah to ensure they didn't claim to get the knowledge from another source.

Only His concern for His own Name on the earth kept Him from burying their ashes in the sand long ago. Unlike silver, which melts at a rather low temperature, He tried them much harder. He brought afflictions on them to cure their wandering hearts; this is fundamental to the way God deals with those He favors. They tried to give His glory to other deities, including the sky and cloud gods, the stars and moon gods, etc. All those things were creations of His hands and would rise at His call more reliably than Israel. This was a not so subtle reminder that nature was bound to the Laws of Noah and Moses, that to reject those covenants was to call for Creation itself to witness against them.

And when it pleases Him, the stars that Babylon worships will celebrate her destruction. The Creator has spoken. Indeed, His living Word has spoken to men's hearts from the very foundation of all things. This was the same Spirit of Messiah to come, but it was meant for Israel to be His voice until then. They didn't know His Word, His voice, so how could they speak His message? Had they clung to Him faithfully, prosperity would have been the least of their concerns. Had they but heeded His simple Word in Moses, they would have nature chasing them down to fill their lives with more than they could use. Instead, they worshiped images from nature. Nature rejects worship for itself, favoring God, instead.

So once this Exile has passed, perhaps there will be a Remnant who would embrace His Word in the second chance. Let them hear and remember, and then flee from fallen Babylon at the earliest opportunity. These would dance through the wilderness on the way back home. Should they do so, rivers of water would open from dry ground for them. That's the way His Word would carry them to a new life in the Old Land.

By contrast, those who reject His Laws will never know *shalom*.

Chapter 49

Israel was called as a nation of priests. Their mission was to reveal God's Law to the world as the primary path to spiritual understanding. Not their own Law, but the Laws of God for the whole world, as summarized by Christ: Love God, love your neighbor as yourself. The soaring image of redeeming all mankind, as though a parent giving birth to uncountable children, was later perverted into a vision of enslaving mankind. When the Messiah came to call them back to their mission, they murdered Him. But this served merely to end their Covenant of Law and force them out into the world of all nations. Now they must become *Israel* again by joining Christ. The nations they sought to enslave are now the only comfort they have in the Lord, the Lord who receives them gladly into the Kingdom of Heaven first offered to them.

This chapter begins the "Suffering Servant" passages. The difficulty in distinguishing between Israel and her Messiah is intentional, because it is the mission that Isaiah emphasizes. This prophecy is not about a nation or a person, per se, but a role. The office of Redeemer was first given to Israel, but she rejected it. The only one willing to don that vestment was Jesus. This passage is about the Office of Suffering Servant, regardless of who serves in that role.

The Servant calls to all humanity, identifying Himself by His divine election from Eternity. The image is one with a sword in His mouth, the Sword of the Spirit, the revelation of God. Naturally, John picks up on this in the Apocalypse, as does the writer of Hebrews. That the Lord gives Him the name *Israel* is a reference to what He had hoped Israel would be – the primary means to His glory among humans. The sense of frustration comes from the nation’s rejection of that role. Further, anyone who attempts to bring that role to the nation faces even worse frustration. They will receive the divine blessing and reward from the Father, but it would hardly be rewarding among men.

So the Lord who called the Servant from the womb, granting such a glorious office that reflects God’s own Presence, will ensure His glory is not wasted. Whether by the nation or not, His revelation to all the world will certainly come. By God’s own election, some of the nation would be saved, but He will also save those from all the nations of mankind. The glory of God will not be frustrated. The nation rejects Him, but rulers of the Gentiles will be honored to know Him.

In the fullness of time, when God waits no longer, the Servant will be sent into the world to establish the New Covenant. If His Own will not have the blessings, then someone else will. The glorious neglected inheritance in Heaven will be delivered as a ransom to those in spiritual prison on the earth, to pull them from the dungeons of sin. Where nothing grows is where they will find spiritual fullness, for it is the nature of the Kingdom. Tribulation destroys sin and all it captures, but builds up and makes mighty those whom He has called out. He guides them to sources of spiritual quenching. He calls to them from all directions, for His ways are the highest. Then will all Creation celebrate in the revelation of His Children, whose true identity has nothing to do with race, borders or time.

Israel the nation should be made to wonder if they have been forgotten. Of course, it’s not so. However, they may be surprised at the change in the identity and meaning of *Israel*. Again, this is the whole issue, for to be Israel is to embrace the office of redemption. So while that name is inscribed on God’s own hands – the nail-prints in Jesus’ hands – this True Israel should expect to see her tribes coming from all over the world. They thought they had a little private club of God, but strangers whom God has decided to include will suddenly overrun it. It will be as if the nations of the world were incubators for children the Jews never knew they had.

Those capable of capturing prey or plunder are not easily robbed of it. However, the ultimate authority in such things is the Creator. The implication is that demonic powers, having plundered the nation by virtue of lawful entrance made by sin, could easily be driven off. Those whom Satan sends to keep people under his foot will end up, not just empty handed, but left to devour themselves. This is how God does things when people repent and turn to Him. He wants so much to be the delivering power to redeem the nation.

Note: The name “Israel” as given to Jacob meant “struggles with El” in the typical ambiguity of one who either struggles to wrest things from God, or as His champion and prince. The implication was to how Jacob had first struggled against God, as it were, but kept losing until he learned, until he became spiritually conditioned enough to know what he should struggle to gain. His first “deal” with God was purely a matter of human comfort in exchange for a token loyalty. It was granted. In the end, he offered his whole being to God and became the father of

His People. Sadly, his children went back the other way, to the point of leaving the covenant altogether.

Chapter 50

Isaiah provides the clearest statement yet that the Nation of Israel would be made obsolete by her own choices. He makes clear in the context that the Messiah would take up where Israel failed as a nation and fulfill her calling.

Addressing the Nation as His wayward children, God dares them to charge Him with neglect. God neither sought nor granted a divorce to Israel. It was certainly not the case that He owed anything to imaginary creditors in Babylon, that He had to sell Israel into slavery. Israel sold themselves into slavery. Had they called upon Him one time, He would have delivered them. With such power and swiftness that they could not imagine, the One who made all things could by His briefest Word unmake all things. He stands ready to deliver them.

However, His Servant is highly educated, of the kind who always seeks to know more. Indeed, from God's own mouth He would be educated, able to lift up the fallen by His *conversation* – an English word once used in the biblical sense of walking the talk. As the One who truly obeyed the will of the Father, He would gladly suffer condemnation and persecution as the price for walking in Truth. Such maltreatment would simply roll off His back, as it were. What condemnation they offered would have no effect, as He would stand in the shadow of Jehovah, who is the living standard by which all things are judged.

Compare that with the Nation. Who seeks to know God's will? It would be those who embrace the teaching of the Servant. Everyone else, by definition, would walk in darkness. Jesus did surely call for them to hear His teaching, but they rejected it. Instead, they shot flaming arrows at Him, seeking to destroy Him. Reversing that, God promised that the Nation would be the one set ablaze by their own angry rejection.

We know for certain that this prophecy was fulfilled. As the national leaders rejected their Messiah, it was the end of their role as leaders, and with them they took down the role of the Nation on this earth. It was transferred to Jesus, who built a new Kingdom of Israel rooted in Heaven.

Chapter 51

While we continue with Messianic promises, it should be obvious that we can't dismiss the more immediate meaning these things had for what was left of Israel as a nation in that time. As with the Apostle Paul, we realize that the entire saga of Israel is a picture of the individual spiritual journey. Not every detail matches every man's experience in Christ, but we can recognize parts of our lives in the underlying structure of things.

Our initial awareness of God is through His Laws. He calls all humanity to repentance. Inherent in the Laws of God is the realization that He calls people to Himself, not some objective standard. Something in the nature of our human existence in a fallen condition drives us to rely on our human performance instead of a personal service to God, so even the very broad and fair

requirements of His Laws are hidden from us. We simply do not have the power to subject our minds to the Spirit. It remains in the hands of God to breach that final barrier between Him and us.

In Christ that opening is offered. Yet, even Jesus made His initial call via the Law of Moses to His people. It was theirs to take it or leave it first. The path for Israel is through the Law to Christ, and through Christ to fulfill what the Law was meant to bring to this world.

God retains a strong interest in using the Law Covenants to call attention to our fallen state. If we do not embrace that awareness of sin, we cannot repent. If we cannot repent, whatever else God wants to do for us won't happen. He will not permit the witness of the Laws to die from the earth. As part of His divine plan to keep the Laws alive, He offers disproportional blessings, exponentially rising as we turn more sincerely toward Him. This promise remained in effect in Isaiah's prophecy here. If Israel will on the national level embrace the call to Return and be what they were called to be, they could find a life far more blessed than when David reigned. So we find Isaiah opening this chapter with a bold promise that did apply on that level, symbolically pointing to the spiritual blessings of following Jesus.

Whence comes either kingdom or Kingdom? It is rooted in the call of Abraham. They who were his literal heirs, as we his spiritual heirs, should cling to his faith. Only in his faith can we find what God promised from the very beginning. By choosing loyalty to God, we can lay claim to the legacy of Eden reborn, whether in some fashion on earth, or yet more surely in the Spirit. In the long run, all Creation as we know it will wear out and only what God plants in Eternity really matters. People whose hearts are reborn can stand with all the assurance of the Creator Himself over His Creation, and all His enemies can do nothing to us. We can with full confidence call on His redemption; His vengeance and wrath against sin cannot harm us. Until Creation has run its course, the Laws of God must be proclaimed; someone must represent God's mission to reveal Himself.

Israel runs the risk of losing that place, of missing out on even the temporal blessings. Isaiah calls his nation to look back at the Exodus, to recall the very powerful destruction visited upon "Rahab" – Egypt. Those who could approach Zion's hill with a true sense of joy and relief would eventually find the Eternal Zion in Heaven. The One who made all things is hardly intimidated by the mightiest oppressor among men. If they would truly return to the Lord in their hearts, all sorrow will be forgotten in the joy of serving Him again.

But as they are now, Judah and her capital city lie in a drunken stupor under the intoxicating influence of sin. This is no giddy tipsy experience, but a great sorrow of sin causing them to stumble about senselessly. There will be no one to support or comfort Jerusalem when the siege comes. The army of Judah will be cut down in the streets.

Yet the Lord has already removed the cup of sorrow from their hands, if they can believe it. In His promise that they have yet to claim, He stands ready to deliver. Even that conquest from Babylon would be brief and they could recover quickly to return upon her head the abuse she will surely offer during the Exile. The Lord speaks of things to come as something established as past even before Him in Heaven. Will they accept His promise and obey?

Chapter 52

What happened to Israel would happen to her Messiah. The difference was in which of them went on to accomplish God's redemptive purpose. The Creator of all things judged sin and brought forth justice. His rulings are justice by definition.

We closed the previous chapter with the question of whether Israel would embrace His rule, obey and lay claim to His promises. Isaiah continues in this chapter calling for Israel to seize the moment and rise from the ashes and rubble of destruction. The literal destruction yet to come at the hands of Babylon, now decreed and surely on the way, was but a symbol of Judah wallowing in sin's destruction. Rise, people of God, to reclaim the just heritage of His calling!

It was Israel who chose to sell herself into the slavery of sin. Her enemies conquered her, made her a slave without offering any price. In His justice, God had ruled that those enemies would receive no compensation when He chose to set His people free. They were enslaved in Egypt and crushed by Assyria. Both of these nations went beyond God's justified wrath and blasphemed God Himself. So it is with Babylon. She would go beyond God's calling, like abusive policemen overstepping their authority, turning their mission of executing justice on its head. But God will not allow this to continue unnoticed. There will come *That Day* when He will execute justice Himself. There will be no doubt who is God and who God is.

The day of God's wrath need not be entirely bad news. Those who wait, longing for His justice, will celebrate the coming of His Executive Officer, the One who will see His justice done. We know Him as the Messiah. While He surely brings the wrath of God's condemnation on sin, He also brings redemption for those who call on the Lord as their Savior. He will announce to Zion that her God reigns. Zion will be known by celebrating His coming, those who cannot keep silent for their joy that sin is judged over the entire earth. The name "Zion" is reserved for those who long for the day His truth spreads abroad to all Creation. It describes a holy desire symbolized by a geographical location.

So let that "Zion" come out of the midst of the false Zion. Just as the Remnant would return, leaving behind the captivity of Babylon, so the spiritual Zion would bear the vessels of God's incarnation in the Holy Spirit. Not refugees from destruction, for as Cyrus sent an armed escort for the Remnant, so God Himself would provide the honor guard for His spiritual children.

They will be as His Messiah. He would come with a level of prudence seldom seen among men. Surely He will bear God's own glory and praise. He would change the whole world by first accepting the full price of sin in Himself. So His followers would bear persecution without complaint. Yet the most potent of human authorities will have no power to argue or overrule His ministry. It will shock them into silence, for nothing on earth can prepare a man to face God's justice.

Chapter 53

As usual, Isaiah offers us a paradox when discussing the Messiah. On the one hand, we all know He inherits the very being of God Almighty. For this cause, some of the most majestic prose in Scripture confronts us here. At the same time, the description is of a man for whom it

seems everyone feels compelled to reject His claims. It is the nature of ultimate Truth that only God can write it on your heart. There is no place in the brain to hold such a thing, because Truth is a Person, not simple objective knowledge. What really matters in the entire Universe in which we exist is something no man can reach out and claim on his own. It can only come as a gift of God's grace.

Thus, the only way to answer the question – “Who would believe our report?” – is to answer the question to whom the Lord has revealed His power on the earth. Lots of people see the works of God and attribute them to other causes. Knowing the mechanics is not the same as knowing the real cause. Those who tend to see past the mechanics to the ultimate purpose of things will be the folks who believe the prophecies. So when He is born and grows up unknown, in humble circumstances, exhibits no particular charisma or handsome face, we should not be surprised when His own nation tries to ignore Him. And when His message intrudes on their system, He would certainly garner violent rejection. Because of this, He surely knows what we suffer. But in our carnal ways, we don't want His solution, so we turn away from His message.

Though He came to bear away all sins, in the main, His nation considered Him a sinner and that all His suffering was because of His own sin. You can't claim God doesn't love enough simply because He allows us to choose sin and suffering. He was more than willing to bear the full price of sin in His flesh. For every judgment against sin, He also declared forgiveness through His willingness to pay the price Himself. Everything He suffered was for us. Yet, humanity continues to look for some other way, as if God were subject to the intellectual standards we can raise by our pitiful imaginations.

So how would He react to this abuse? We stand on the far side of the story today and would be hard pressed to claim He complained at all. It should be obvious why: It's the reason He was born. Not just suffering in the broad human sense, but totally without justice. He was arrested, set before a judge without crime and sentenced to death. Yet it was not for His own crimes, but ours. He died with criminals, but was buried among the rich and powerful who persecuted Him most, God's way of noting He would be sinless.

Sounds insane? That's because humans can never quite understand God. Even the people of Isaiah's day who read this could have gotten that from this chapter. While it was God's desire to make His Son suffer, it was His decision that this was the only path to paying the price for our sins. Once the price was paid, He could found an Eternal Empire of souls. How do you describe the sense of accomplishment that this would bring Jesus, as He looks back on His ministry? To know that His purity is more communicable than sin, to know that His poverty pointed out the immeasurable wealth of Truth, that His death was the greatest victory – all because there was no one else to plead the case of fallen man before God.

Chapter 54

What joys, what mighty bottomless pool of blessings awaited those who returned from Babylon if they would turn from the sins of their fathers and embrace afresh the ancient Covenant of

Moses? We'll never know. However, Isaiah paints a glowing image of it in symbolic language and ends up describing the life in the Spirit after Christ's Ascension.

A woman bereft of children is not the same as one who never bore. Israel was taken away into exile, rather like a woman who lost her children. Had she learned the lessons of Isaiah and the other prophets, she could come back home and start fresh and new as a woman who simply has not yet borne children. Not just forgotten would be the sorrows from before, but it would be as if they had never happened, no more than a shadowy bad dream. Israel would not, so what we have instead is a contrast between Judah, the "the married woman" versus Christ's Kingdom, which had not yet borne fruit. Barren wives were often treated poorly. In this unspoken thought, we note the spiritual side of God's "Israel" was never well received by the Nation. But when her time came, the True Israel outgrew the Old Testament Israel beyond comparing, because her progeny included all nations.

So when she bears fruit, she will be like a rowdy young wife who finally shows her worth. He would proudly own her as His beloved. By being the bride of the Maker of all things, her social standing is without peer. The shunning of Old Israel would be exchanged for the public celebration of a precious spouse. The time of separation would be forgotten as a brief incident.

In God's eyes, the Flood of Noah, harsh as it was, took away the constant, nagging, in-your-face embarrassment of very public provocation. The earth was cleansed of those who would never turn to the light. Once past, God changed things to ensure it need not happen again. Thus, if Israel would return to their ancient spiritual calling, there would never again be a time when Israel would be removed from the Land. As we know, roughly a century after Christ, the Jews were driven from Palestine by Roman soldiers, so it's obvious she never accepted the terms of renewal. Instead, we have a spiritual empire that cannot be removed under any human power.

This New Realm of the Spirit is indescribably delightful. How can you compare the vast riches of God's Heaven with mere building materials? It would have to be like a city founded on huge precious stones, walls of treasures, roofing of jewelry. The children of this New Covenant would be taught by virtue of being God's children. In obeying the drawing of the Spirit, the new kingdom would embrace all the blessings ever offered by God under any covenant before. Nothing could possibly threaten the security, health and prosperity of such a realm, because it would be the same as threatening God Himself. If God, who can create the fire of the forge, the very iron forged in it, and the blacksmith who works it, how can any mere human build a weapon to bring harm to Him? Just so, no weapon of man can truly harm God's spiritual people. Moreover, His very righteousness will be placed in our names, so no accusation can stand.

Chapter 55

The offer stands. Anyone who senses a desire to approach God and serve Him will surely be welcomed into His Presence. There are covenant blessings in this life and the spiritual covenant blessings of eternity. The former is a parable of the latter; it is essentially impossible to separate them, because the language of one is that of the other. Isaiah declares here the ways of God, carried in a message about the Covenant of Moses, but which surely applies to Noah and Christ.

This chapter is highly quoted in the New Testament and many will find these verses familiar, even to the point of modern songs thickly drawn from here.

What is the basis for a covenant with God? It's typically the sense of need, the "thirst" for things that human commerce cannot provide. Trade in the world's goods may pile up in your barns, but will mean nothing if you don't seek the blessings of God. The moral quality of the universe may not be obvious, but that does not make it less real. The gains of sin cannot fill the heart, but righteous acquisitions under the Laws will bring peace that God alone can give.

The price God demands is not measured as men measure things, but in terms of your heart, your loyalty and commitment to His Person. David becomes the symbol of both the Royal House of Israel, but also the Last Davidic King, Jesus. At his best, David merely kept peace with the Gentile nations, while Christ sent His message of repentance and forgiveness to all humanity. Further, it is certain those nations will heed that call.

God does eventually close the door one final time. He alone knows when. For so long as the message goes forth, it's not too late. Anyone anywhere on this earth can turn to Him and embrace the Covenant offer. There is always room in His provision to cover sin, to restore peace. We cannot pretend to limit Him and His actions or His choices. We cannot pretend we will ever understand so much as He chooses to reveal of Himself. So long as we stand in this life, there remains much that we cannot grasp. All the more so, we cannot pretend to approach His revelation with merely what man's mind can construct. We cannot pretend human logic can explain it all.

We might know the mechanisms of hydrology. What we cannot grasp is what makes it rain or snow, only what things often come with it. Precipitation falls to the earth, plants and animals absorb it, crops grow and we eat them. When God acts to reveal Himself, that revelation does not fail. When He offers promises under His covenants, they always come true. What He commands never fails, so it is upon us to walk in His commands to reap the harvest of life.

Those who returned from Babylonian Exile would rightly rejoice with song and dance. So those released from their captivity to sin, embracing the promises of the covenant, as they come out into the life God designed us for, will be filled with joy hard to express for its greatness. Creation itself will rejoice at those who live according to God's revelation, for Creation is designed to respond to the just and righteous conduct of people. Mountains and hills will sing, trees will wave and clap their hands, celebrating at the opportunity to join us in righteous living. Thorns will cease to grow, giving place to cypress trees; briars will yield to oaks. Let it never be forgotten that God favors those who favor His ways.

Chapter 56

The concept of "holiness" begins with separation. God separates between those who are loyal to Him, and those who are not. On the surface, the Law of Moses presents a recognizable standard for seeking holiness. A loyal heart will strive to please God. That ritual and civil loyalty will open the door to a higher spiritual loyalty. Those who will not embrace the external measures cannot claim to be loyal on any level.

A resounding theme throughout prophetic history in Scripture is *the Day of the Lord*. While we can surely point out times in human history that can be called “the Day of the Lord,” we would surely miss the point if we limit the term to such events. The concept rises far above that and represents any situation in which God moves to judge sin. For those who cling to Him, sin is sheared off and they are made more holy. All others cling to sin and are sheared off with it; they are destroyed, burned up in God’s wrath. For Isaiah to warn that God’s salvation is about to appear is another way of saying He is about to act against sin. Yet, in another sense, every day is “the Day of the Lord.” The declaration is not meaningless, but in the standards of ANE cultural background, it serves to warn that we should always be watching, keeping an eye on ourselves to discern any moment when our motives are impure. This is the nature of God. It also means God is about to judge Judah for failure to keep faith in the Covenant and issue a discrete sentence of wrath in the Exile. The symbol for Covenant faithfulness is keeping the Sabbath. The larger meaning is in the phrase, “keeps his hand from doing evil.”

Anyone can become a Son of the Law, can join himself to the Nation of Israel by entering into the Covenant of Moses. From God’s point of view, Israel is defined by the Covenant, not by genetic inheritance. So the foreigner who embraces Moses becomes “Israel” in the eyes of God. The eunuch, normally forbidden to participate as a man of Israel, can be closer to God in heart than the whole nominal nation. The standard is keeping Moses, not as law, but as the personal call to loyalty. This is about loving His name, a heartfelt desire to serve Him any way it pleases Him. These are always welcome in His presence. Levitical Law will keep certain people out of the Court of Israel and surely out of the Holy Place. However, in spiritual terms, the loyal servant’s heart stands in God’s very Presence as a beloved child. Thus, Israel is told very bluntly that it is her mission on earth to gather those of Israel who wander astray, but to also gather anyone who wanders close enough spiritually, anyone God draws by His Holy Spirit, from among the vast spread of humanity.

By contrast, there are many among the very leaders of the Nation who are complete enemies. Isaiah draws the picture of sheep herding dogs too lazy to care about the flock. He will invite the beasts of the field to dine on the dogs, which is the same as offering the leadership of Israel to all manner of conquest and predation by utterly unholy pagan nations. The leaders would include kings, nobles, priests, prophets, etc. Their selfishness makes them unfit for their roles. They are no better than idle rich punks bragging how they will party hearty, day after day. Who can stop them? They won’t know until God has then dragged away in fetters.

Chapter 57

This chapter sounds so very much like the reign of Manasseh that it’s hard to imagine it arising from any other context. Though the king did repent at the end of his long reign of evil, it was too late and the Law had been so utterly forgotten that the priests under his heir had never seen a copy of Moses. Thus, Isaiah describes the unspeakable moral filth of that day.

Manasseh had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood. Everything was turned on its head; righteousness was outlawed and the righteous executed for being holy. Isaiah speaks of them falling asleep in the same sense as used in the New Testament, noting that the righteous so

murdered are better off than those who will survive to see such horrendous evil. The righteous will instead be walking in the presence of the Lord in Heaven.

The reason for such depth of perversion in Judah was the eager idolatries of her people. Isaiah refers to the leaders as sons of depraved women. They made satire of God, bearing in their hearts a sheer lust for any imaginable deity *except* Jehovah. The vile religious rituals included every known sexual perversion, with the unspeakable murder of infants as offerings to the oven-god Molech. They are derided as the sort of people who would grab a smooth rock from a streambed and make it their god.

More than just adulterous infidelity against God, it would seem Judah researched new ways to prostitute herself. Isaiah paints a picture of a woman who builds a huge bed so she can have many lovers lined up. So she had pursued the despicable Molech and even sent numerous love letters to Hell, addressed "To Whom it may concern." Judah never seemed to wear out in seeking perversion, driven like a demon.

That God was in no hurry to punish is not from lack of caring. The greatest weakness of our fallen state is our inability to even think, must less operate, on God's time scale. It's a fatal spiritual disability to think in terms of minutes and seconds, when the most important things in the universe take centuries. But eventually, Judah's time will run out and God will refuse to listen to her most sincere cries of distress. Let her cry to her idols, which can't survive so much as a derisive snort from God's nostrils. Contrast that with those who remain loyal to the Lord, for nothing is too good for them.

We rightly see God as the highest and holiest, in Heaven itself, yet He also resides in hearts that cling to Him. The primary difference between sinner and saint is contrition. The evil simply will not turn from their sins. But the moment that there is a flicker of remorse, God hurries faster than thought to redeem. Indeed, the apparent righteousness of any people is merely the result of His grace acting in fallen lives that belong to Him. The fruit of sin compares favorably to a mucky seashore, waves splashing filth onto all who approach the waters. Such will never know His promised *shalom*.

Chapter 58

The quintessential Isaiah: another statement about loyalty to Jehovah. It is also an excellent summation, as it is surely part of the source of Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees. They had all the particulars figured out, but had no clue what it was they were about.

Isaiah quotes the command from God to prophesy against Judah's sins. He then launches into a very sarcastic description of the purely externalized holiness of his nation. Sure, they seek God daily and live according to the Law. They come into the Temple, engage in fasting and then wonder why God doesn't keep His end of the Covenant.

God responds with the ancient demand: "Show Me!" Don't yammer about it all day; prove your devotion by how it changes your heart. On the fast days, they still chased worldly comforts. That's affliction? People who afflict themselves don't immediately turn around and afflict others. Fasting from food, along with the ritual sackcloth and ashes, is a symbol of recognizing

you have sinned and fully deserve God's wrath. That leaves no room for expressing personal wrath for others. Don't bother going through the motions if you aren't penitent in your hearts.

Repentance makes us conscious of our burdens, feeling the weight pressing down because of the burdens we have placed on others. Fasting penitence means rushing out to forgive others. As Jesus put it, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive others." Penitent souls are eager to loose the bonds of others and to relieve all human misery. True fasting of the soul empowers acts of redemption for others: feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, housing the outcast, etc. You put on sackcloth and ashes precisely so you may give your garments to the naked. That's when God hears your cry.

In the previous chapter we saw where Manasseh's reign was characterized by criminalizing righteousness. Isaiah raises it here again, speaking of the yoke of false accusations. He talks about the light of God's compassion on the afflicted. The promises of the Covenant were fairly broad, with a recognized meaning in worldly terms. However, they were but mere symbols of the spiritual blessings possible. Isaiah uses soaring language to describe that spiritual element: Your worst experiences will be glorious. The Lord will guide, fill, strengthen and water your soul. You will turn chaotic rubble into gleaming palaces.

Don't use the weekly holy day as an excuse to chase frivolous leisure activities. If you cannot grasp the concept of God's rest, how can you hope to please Him? The problem is with what people find entertaining. It takes an utterly empty soul to demand constant external stimuli. People who are filled with the Spirit of God have no trouble taking a break from worldly concerns so they can give their focus to God. Modern technology can as easily enslave as it can lighten burdens. The legacy of being Children of Israel was fast disappearing down the drain, replaced with something artificial and worthless.

Chapter 59

In a literal sense, Isaiah offers yet another description of the sorrows of Manasseh's reign. Prophetically he describes the nation as Jesus found it. Spiritually, he offers a look at how God operates among humans, particularly regarding the duty of social and civil leadership. Human governments, regardless of place and time, are obliged to maintain the covenant that applies to them. Isaiah uses Manasseh as a concrete example of eternal principles.

God has made promises under every covenant He established among men. Moses revealed the Lord's desire to grant Israel *shalom*, summarized as prosperity, health, safety and security. Plainly stated in Moses, these same blessings were implied under the broader global Covenant of Noah. They apply universally, as do the curses also detailed in Moses. This is the way all Creation operates until the Return of Christ. When under King Manasseh, the prayers of Judeans for God's provision of *shalom* failed and there was an obvious reason: The leaders of the nation refused to hold up their end of the Covenant. They were disloyal to their True Suzerain in Heaven. Had not Jehovah demonstrated from the very beginning His willingness and power to grant generously everything promised? Isaiah graphically portrays Judah's failures as a screaming cry that drowned out their faint whispers for redemption.

God's standard of justice was simply too obvious and clear. There was no excuse. Words of prayer mean nothing when arising from acts that defy His commands. There was no part of them that desired what God desired. Did they believe it was simply some kind of magic, like a slot machine? Say the words, do the rituals and that's it? You can't get songbirds from viper's eggs.

The gossamer strands of a spider's web do not hide sin. Such was the entire "holiness" of Judah's leaders. That men must have a covering for sin need not be said. These people didn't even bother to hide their sins, but eagerly ran to them. Both in their impulses and long term plans, they were committed to anything but God. They couldn't find peace if it was a major landmark.

Isaiah sadly finds himself in the middle of this mess. He personally reaps the whirlwind of injustice brought by Manasseh's court. The days were dark and evil, indeed. When his heirs found a copy of the Law, they were both thrilled and deeply shocked by what it told them. Manasseh consciously sought to destroy, literally and figuratively, all knowledge that God had revealed. Still, no one was fooled; they knew instinctively. Their sins crowded around like family members at a reunion, beloved one and all. Anyone who dared to seek the path of righteousness was hounded and oppressed as an enemy. It was a good guess that you could identify righteousness as just about anything unpopular with the elite.

If God came to visit, He would be deeply disappointed at finding no welcome. Nobody would meet Him at the gate, longing for His arrival. Whatever it was God planned to do would require Him to act alone. Fine; He would wear His Truth like armor and attack sin directly. Those wedded to their sins would suffer loss and desolation. When He was through, they would surely know the standards once again, from one end of the Universe to the other. Who would be left alive to embrace them and serve His Name?

When the Messiah comes, where He makes that first footfall will be Zion. Not because He's coming to some place already named Zion, but that where He stands is Zion by definition. Those from any nation, but the Children of Jacob in particular, who embrace Him as Lord will be "Israel." This will be the New Covenant, with a New Nation of God. His own Spirit will hover over them; His revelation will be their new nature and so it will be to anyone born into this New Nation. It will surely grow by its nature and it will be eternal.

Chapter 60

Having spent the majority of his prophecy condemning Judah for failure to keep the Covenant, Isaiah turned in the last few chapters to the Messianic Promises. God's redemption of Israel would come on His terms and that meant a new covenant. Once Israel was dragged off into Exile, she strayed farther and farther from the path of truth. Upon the Return and Restoration, she had become so materialistic that her soul was fertile ground for the infection of Hellenism. By the time Jesus confronts the nation with the ancient truth, this particular chapter in Isaiah had been utterly twisted to support the notion that Messiah would bring the material wealth of the world to Jerusalem. What a horrendous fall from the glorious truth, a truth too grand for words!

Whatever it was Israel should have been is what the New Israel would be. She would rise like the morning sun, reflecting the glory of God Himself. While the Gentile Nations had been allowed to wander in darkness spiritually for thousands of years, now would come the truth, shining for all to see.

What had been the spiritual sterility of Old Israel would be replaced by the vast spiritual growth of the Realm of the Spirit. Children as yet unborn, converted not by Law, but by the Spirit would populate the New Israel. This would be the spiritual wealth of the Kingdom: Souls reborn, without number. All the transports in the world would not be enough to carry their number, streaming to the new Spiritual Jerusalem, which would be so secure in the Lord that there would be no gates. Nations that set up systems to prevent minds and souls hearing the gospel would be destroyed, given to new rulers who would respect God's plans.

The treasures of the world would hardly suffice to present a due offering for the boundless spiritual blessings. People will gladly sacrifice all they have and all they are to purchase a place in Christ's Realm. What had been the deep embarrassment to God of Israel's truculent sins would become the glory of New Israel. The difference is so great that it's hard to describe in human terms. It would be as if exchanging common materials for precious, and cheap junk for first rate stuff. The New Land of the Spirit would be ruled, not by mere men, but by peace and righteousness. No one will notice mere suffering of the flesh, because the joys of the Spirit would be too great.

For once, mankind will be able to see with the eyes of God. The full truth of things will be revealed, and this fallen world will be laid bare by the full understanding of the Spirit. It will be as if neither moon nor sun ever goes down. Righteousness will be a defining quality of those who walk in this light. These will have an eternal inheritance too rich for words. Mere children will have more power and wisdom than any army of men, because those who walk in the Spirit can do anything God desires. When that Final Day of Christ dawns, things will happen so quickly that few will be able to grasp it even after the fact. The greatest tragedy is how Israel refused to have this marvelous spiritual treasure because they insisted on demanding that God supply the literal version.

Chapter 61

Isaiah continues celebrating the coming age of the Messiah, when the Kingdom of Heaven, the Realm of the Spirit, shall be manifest among the people of Israel. That the leaders and teachers of Israel downplayed the spiritual elements and seized upon the literal meaning of some portions of this chapter helps explain why Jesus had such a struggle getting people to see what it was all about, and what boundless joy He offered.

So we begin with the passage Jesus Himself read on a particular Sabbath and taught it's meaning. The Messiah would come to those at the bottom of society because they would be the only ones with nothing to lose and everything to gain by embracing the otherworldly gospel of spiritual redemption. God's last and final vengeance on sin was at the Cross. Everything that follows is merely the extended realization of what that sacrifice purchased. Very few people in

Jesus' day mourned their sins; very few felt the call of repentance when John the Baptist began preaching. Those few were the ones who were able to enter into the joy of eternal living.

It is they who would restore the name "Israel" to what it should have meant in this world. The ruins of her calling to bring revelation would be built up, to create the refuge of nations fleeing the wrath of God. This new Realm of Christ would draw strength and sustenance from people eager to present an offering to God, to include their very lives. Christ would open the door by His eternal sacrifice, and every living being could embrace His offering as their own answer to the desperation of sin. The only way any Israelis could partake is to embrace that same sacrifice for their own, as it was theirs first. Those who embrace it would fully exemplify the priesthood to which Israel had first been called. Jews coming to Jesus have a double portion of His glory and rightly so.

Since the Lord is Truth Himself, it stands to reason that He hates falsehood. He is the standard of justice and will not accept the offerings of a man's hands, only the offering He gives Himself. Those who embrace His provision will partake in a covenant that cannot be broken by anything a man can do or fail to do, because it will be rooted in God's own nature. Those who live that divine nature will become instantly recognizable the world over. Such people are filled with joy and clothed with God's gift of righteousness. The nature of the Lord growing out of His people is beyond words.

Chapter 62

Through His prophets, the Lord had called both Israel and Judah adulterous prostitutes. He bought each out of slavery, but they sold themselves again. He bought them out repeatedly, but eventually He had to let them go a lot farther. Though He did buy Judah back one last time, it was never the same. So we find Isaiah celebrating the coming Messianic Age when God would remake Israel as a bride incapable of adultery.

Zion was a symbol for Heaven, the throne of God. For the sake of His Throne in Heaven, the Lord must remake Israel. He refused to rest in the failure of earthly Israel, but was determined to build a spiritual empire, a place where righteousness was as natural as the air we breathe or the light of day. The whole world would see this brand of eternal living and be drawn to it. While this new nation of the spirit would inherit the privileges attached to the name of Israel, He would give it yet a new name, to reflect the newness of what it would be. This new Bride would wear the crown of God's own glory. While earthly Israel would be called Forsaken and Desolate, the New Israel would be called My Delightful Wife.

It's possible a few hardy souls in Old Israel would desire to see this new Realm of the Spirit. Like faithful soldiers on guard duty atop the city walls, these would be looking for the coming of His Kingdom. Indeed, they would call out to the Lord to make it so. It would have to be something God Himself would do, because no man was capable. The God who granted enemies to oppress Israel on earth would be the same God who prospered the Spiritual Israel of Heaven. The former rejected His promises; the latter would have nothing but His promises: sustenance, security, and stability.

Anticipation was burning in the heart of God. He couldn't wait to see it come. He called for His prophets to lay the groundwork for this new nation, to make the path obvious and smooth. The celebratory announcement would go around the whole world. The Messiah would come through Israel and His own brand of holiness would be the character of His People. The Heavenly Zion would be bigger than any tourist destination in history, drawing souls from the whole of humanity, from every corner of Creation. Yet it would be in truth the Lord who seeks them out, making His New Zion a place overflowing with joyful souls.

Chapter 63

God is interactively involved in His Creation, a living relationship that ignores the constraints of our human awareness on that level. So it is with That Last Day, as well as every other *That Day* on the way. We cannot hope to comprehend what lies behind it, only that it represents His own sense of justice against sin. Isaiah begins this chapter with a type of *That Day*, which echoes down to the final end of all things.

The symbol of Edom is complex. It means "red" as much from the appearance and appetites of the man Esau as from the appearance of the place. It was generally south by southeast from where Isaiah prophesied and wrote. For God to arise from that direction with robes stained red conjured the explicit image of red grape juice from wine making and the blood of warfare. It could easily remind one of red dust clouds on the southern horizon, but was the symbol of God's wrath against sin. During Isaiah's lifetime, Edom had committed several egregious crimes against her cousin, Israel, and so it was also the place of great sin.

The point Isaiah makes is that no one seems willing to stand for Him against the sin that characterized Edom the place, Edom the people or Edom the man who gave them his name. Was Jacob now at peace with Esau, the Chosen now cooperating with the Rejected? How was Israel more righteous than Edom? The history of Israel was the history of grand heights from which she repeatedly dove head first into failure, wallowing in sin more often than struggling against it. In the end, God was left to accomplish His redemption alone. So it would be when He sent His Son, who would fulfill the failed destiny of Israel and fulfill the Covenant. God was the Guarantor from the start and the final acts of closure were His. Sadly, it was the people of Israel who would be trodden down with their sin.

Against this Isaiah compares the purity and worthiness of the God whose wrath fell on Israel. He alone is the wronged party, for He abundantly offered and supplied more than Israel dared ask. All along the way, He kept calling her back to His bosom. Time and time again, He acted as the love-stricken husband, who so quickly forgot her sins. Surely she would get it right this time! No. Finally, with a broken heart, He had to let her take the path she had chosen.

Surely He never forgot, though. During those brief moments of righteousness, she was such a treasure to behold! Could not this God Almighty finish what He started? Was He who brought her out of Egyptian slavery unable to make her His queen? This is the image of our common human condition after the Fall. We cannot even want His redemption, so it is by His own hand and choice that we are brought up from slavery under sin. Every moment of every day, He purchases us back from slavery. The difference is that our identity as followers of Christ is not

simply a discrete nation on earth, one among many nations, with a covenant based merely on ritual and laws. Our identity is purely spiritual, rooted in Christ Himself. This is the ultimate redemption, the final fulfillment of all God's desires for His Creation.

Under such an eternal covenant, what would He see when looking down upon us from Heaven? Can He see any part of Himself on earth? Yes, His zeal is alive in spirits reborn. Abraham and Jacob could not have imagined the end result of their promises. Why did He make Israel hardened against His love? So that He could share it with all Creation. Israel's rejection is our acceptance.

Chapter 64

When you commit your whole being to knowing and doing the will of God, you quickly get to the point where almost nothing around you makes any sense at all. The revelation of God is so very crystal clear, but the darkness and sin that crowds up against your very soul – you wonder if you can hold your sanity. Your spirit cries out for the judging hand of God to fall. Even if it means destroying your very life, you can't take any more offense against the Lord.

This is where Isaiah finds himself. Can the Lord not refresh the experience Israel had before Mount Sinai, with all the fire, smoke and earthquakes? What would it take for the fear of God to descend upon this awful world? While the language refers to the impure nations that did not have the revelation of God, we cannot forget how often the Children of Israel themselves acted as if they had never seen or heard the mighty works of God's revelation. To whom does God reveal Himself? Those eager to see, those already committed to whatever that revelation demands of them would see Him. People who rush to know their sins so they may repent are the folks who see God.

And, oh – how very much sin there is from which to repent! The poetry of Isaiah's confession echoes repeatedly as quotations in the New Testament. Yet, the truth came far before Isaiah's time. It is the very nature of fallen man, the quandary in which we all find ourselves. Were it not for the resolve of God Himself to save some remnant of Creation for Eternity, there would be nothing today but Hell. We have only the cry for mercy.

What have we done, but raised up Hell in His Eden? The safety of the great City of Zion is a delusion, for it is actually a wilderness of sin. Man's pitiful acts of worship seem almost as destruction of the things God made. Isaiah weeps because he knows his nation, the one to whom God gave the full revelation that was offered to no other people on earth, given a homeland and Temple, and called by His name, has made an even greater mess of things than those who never knew Him.

Chapter 65

Where was Israel when God found her? Was there ever a time she actually sought Him, even from the very beginning? A spiritual question answered by historical reality – no, Israel did not seek God, for it has always been His to intrude where none are aware of Him. Israel was no different. But Israel in particular was a hard case. In some ways, we can call the Old Testament a triumph of God's will over the most hard-hearted nation in history. All the while they rejected

His Law, they were telling the rest of the world how much holier they were. The history of the Nation is summed up in constant offense to God.

That God did not take action on a human time scale should not be mistaken for leniency. God by His own nature cannot abide sin and must respond with wrath. It's not as if any other nation was better than Israel, but that Israel had the full revelation for their time and refused to honor it, or to honor the God who revealed Himself to them in a way not available to any other nation. Lying to a stranger is one thing, but betraying your Heavenly Father, closer than your blood kin, is beyond words. To the very soul of their being, the Lord would punish them fully.

Of course, there were a select few who were faithful. Their faithfulness cried out for some redemptive effort. But it could not be as though He would save the actual whoring wife called Israel. Instead, some child of their broken union would take her place in His inheritance. She would lose her name to another, but it would never be quite the same. Indeed, it would be far better. The New Israel would seek Him, because it would all be on different terms. No, Israel the First was a complete failure. Unwilling to be faithful, they sought the most pernicious deities as their gods.

Simple death itself would be too good for them. Instead of a dignified execution, He would abandon them to the full consequences of the sin they chose. Worse, they will look on as this New Israel receives all the things they rejected, but never knew. The Law of Moses was the path to a much higher Law of God. The blessings of Moses were but symbols of much higher blessings. Since Israel hardly entered into the lower, how could she ever know the higher? Indeed, God warns that the literal name "Israel" would become a curse. In the end, God would wipe away His sorrow in Israel by burying the memory under His New Kingdom.

John quotes verse 17 in the Apocalypse, but fools adamantly insist on a literal meaning that neither Isaiah nor John intended. That is, the literal meaning is, at most, a mere symbol of something too great for words. When anyone enters the Blood Covenant of Christ, he sees all Creation through eyes now suddenly clear, in a revealing light now pushing aside the shadows of sin. Both earthly and heavenly things change in his understanding. So it is that our God will peel back the layers of mystery that hid the entire Creation, so men will have access to God's own perspective on all things. Whatever it was Jerusalem and Israel were supposed to mean will be revealed and the former shadowy versions will be forgotten by comparison.

In this new spiritual existence on the earth, living a hundred years in sin will be a curse, while just a few days of grace will be eternity. What the Redeemed can build with this is hard to characterize, but it will be as if all Palestine was laid waste and the New Kingdom built from fresh new materials as something that cannot be described. No human force can take away, because its true nature is rooted in Heaven. Everything Old Israel thought she enjoyed was nothing by comparison.

Most importantly of all is how these New Israelites will relate to Jehovah. He won't wait for them to hold a solemn assembly to call upon His name for relief, but will answer before they can formulate the very thoughts of calling on Him. As they open their mouths to state their request, He will already have the blessings in His hands. Can you imagine a world without

predators? Can you envision a world in which there is no threat? So is the world Our God makes for His New Nation.

Chapter 66

In this final chapter, Isaiah paints a final image of the Messianic Kingdom. The biggest mistake we could make is trying to push this back into some literal future End Time, when it merely indicates the eternal nature of things. Here on earth, we experience the Messianic Kingdom as a present reality in the spirit, but only partially on the earthly plane. Isaiah foresaw this as the way God had always dealt with humanity, but specifically reveals how things will change once Messiah offers the final revelation of God.

First, Isaiah establishes the eternal truth that men had long tried to ignore: Rituals only symbolize a spiritual truth. They are not themselves truth; they have no power beyond creating awareness. How could anything man does with his hands make any difference if his heart – his ultimate commitment – is not in it? When men seek to manipulate God’s good favor by mere rote observance of rituals, it only makes them more offensive to God. Empty observance is the real abomination to the Lord and justly earns His wrath.

Worse, these are the same folks who mock those taking it all seriously. Such was the fashion among Jewish nobles and royalty during Isaiah’s ministry. Little did they know that God would descend suddenly, when it makes no sense at all on a human scale. When He comes, these would be attacked as His enemies. What God is going to do in *That Day* is to replace the whole mess. All at once, out of nothing and nowhere, a complete nation of His servants will be born. Does anyone think God can bring things to the brink and not finish? What He has promised, though it seems to take forever in coming, will most certainly become reality on the earth.

As if the city of Jerusalem was suddenly vacated, and then repopulated with his new and faithful nation, all the old names will be given to a new people. Those few among Israel who longed for such a day would rejoice to see a new people become what Israel was called to be. They’ll be dancing in the streets when the Lord’s war chariot comes riding through, while sinners will flee. Not that anyone could escape. There will no longer be folks putting on their Hebrew Holy best outfit, and then going off to worship at a pagan shrine. It’s not as if God didn’t see them doing that.

No, God knew their sins all too well. He would replace them with a New Nation drawn from every race across the world. Indeed, it’s those Jews who escape His wrath who would go out and seek the Gentiles to fill again the streets of Jerusalem, flooding the Temple with celebrations of God. Even the old distinction of Levites and Priests will disappear, as folks from these other nations would become His new priesthood.

And this time, once He reveals His New Heaven and New Earth to His children, there won’t be any preparation for an end. This will be the end; it will stand for eternity. There will never again be a time when the Temple of God in Heaven will be empty, but it will be filled continually with His praises. From their spiritual city above, they will look down upon the corpses of sinners and watch as their misery stretches just as far into eternity as their own joy.

So it is that Isaiah closes with one last warning against Judah. It was too late for them as a nation. If there was to be any hope, it was as individual members of that New Nation in Christ.