



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 11 Issue 38

October 7, 2012

God's Response When His People Rebel

There are two tasks in mind as we look at any text. The first is to handle it faithfully. And secondly our goal is to become familiar with the ongoing flow of this prophecy. That means we will have to explain the contents of Isaiah 28-39. Yet this really is not two tasks, for Isaiah 28-39 truly is the background for the glorious call of Isaiah 40:1-11!

In our study of this book, we have seen that Isaiah 1-5 gives us a foretaste of the themes found throughout this prophetic work. For example, the opening chapters contain a statement concerning the will of the people of God to cast off God and His authority over them, and to live as independent, free individuals (cf. Isaiah 1:2-4, 10-15, 21-23; 2:5-11).

Isaiah 1:4, "Alas, sinful nation, people weighed down with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who act corruptly! They have abandoned the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away from Him."

This in fact is what they did and what we do every time we indulge in sin! It also contains God’s response to His people’s rebellion. And what is that response? Nothing less than the heavy hand of discipline.

Isaiah 1:25, “I will also turn My hand against you, and will smelt away your dross as with lye, and will remove all your alloy.”

Now as bad as this sounds the stated purpose of the discipline wasn’t misery for misery sake, but the good and the growth of His people, “...I will smelt away your dross...” When God’s people rebel we see that God gives an immediate response to His people’s sin.

In Isaiah 13-27 the prophet concerns himself with the welfare of the people of God as they faced the difficult trials of the eighth century BC. He asked the question to whom or to what would they flee? The focus of Isaiah’s ministry at this point was to exhort the nation of Judah to flee to “the holy one of Israel!”

Yet it is clear that the nation would not listen. In fact we see the heartbeat of the nation *metaphorically* in the closing chapters of this section (Isaiah 36-39) which contains the interaction of Hezekiah both with the Assyrian King, Sennacherib, (Isaiah 36-37) and the Babylonian tribal lord, Merodach-baladan, (Isaiah 37-38).

- In the case of Sennacherib (who was intent on crushing Judah in 701 BC), recall that Hezekiah at first faltered in his faith and so made appeal to the Egyptians. But when push came to shove, Hezekiah eventually went into the temple of God and poured his heart out before the Lord. The Lord heard his cry and delivered Judah.
- In the case of Merodach-baladan, after Hezekiah was healed, this Babylonian tribesman sent an envoy to Judah both to celebrate Hezekiah’s health as well as to seek an ally against Assyria. Hezekiah (flattered by the presence of this delegation) entered into a relationship with Babylon showing the delegation that which was at their disposal the riches of the treasury of God. Hezekiah’s hope and trust now was in Babylon!

That Isaiah deigned to close this section (Isaiah 1-39) with these two historical accounts is typical! What we see in Hezekiah is what the nation itself would do. There would be many in Judah like Hezekiah facing Sennacherib who would furtively trust the Lord. But on the other, when push came to shove, many of these same people would willingly and quickly ally themselves with anyone or thing which promised earthly security/relief- just as Hezekiah did with the Babylonians.

With this we see the focus of Isaiah 28-35, the next section. This section once again utilizes the literary tool of Progressive Parallelism by which Isaiah preached two sermons containing the same, three-point

outline. This serves to acknowledge the people’s rebellion against God AND YET to exhort Judah one more time to trust their Lord.

<u>Isaiah 28-29</u>	<u>Isaiah 30-35</u>
Isaiah 28:1-29 Triumph of Blessing in the Face of Rebellion	Isaiah 30:1-33
Isaiah 29:1-14 God's Protection of Jerusalem	Isaiah 31:1-32:20
Isaiah 29:15-24 Judgment, Vindication, and Glory	Isaiah 33:1-35:10

From the outline you will note that this passage lies in the first point of Isaiah’s second sermon. If you read both passages (Isaiah 28 and 30) you will see that both address the issue of Egypt and God’s people’s unhealthy propensity to trust this nation. We pick up

Isaiah's exhortation right after he described the futility of relying upon Egypt.

Isaiah 30:8a, "Now go, write IT on a tablet before them [which would be a public record] and inscribe it on a scroll [which would be a private record]..."

The word "IT" references the word of God! Clearly the public and private record referenced in this text was the revelation that God gave to Isaiah (which here was Isaiah 28-35)!¹ And God gave us His word that it might:

Isaiah 30:8b, "...serve in the time to come as a witness forever."

When God gave us this word, He intended it to be the rule by which we must live our lives *forever!* Truly contained in this book is the revelation of God and so eternal truths which will never change. And what that means is that what Isaiah wrote is most certainly applicable to us! It was not intended merely for his generation, but every generation that would endeavor to be a servant of the living God! With this, Isaiah continued.

Isaiah 30:9-11, "For this is a rebellious people, false sons, sons who refuse to listen to the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, 'You must not see *visions*'; and to the prophets, 'You must not prophesy to us what is right, speak to us pleasant words [that is, "smooth words"- words which wouldn't ruffle the surface of their life], prophesy illusions [or "trifles"- things which are of no consequence to the here and now]. Get out of the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.'"

This is shocking! It indicates that a propensity of the child of God, not merely the pagan in the bush, but the genuine servant of the Lord, will be to

- (1) Resent the word of God
- (2) Neglect the word of God, and so
- (3) Reject the word of God!

Isn't this what Adam and Eve did in the garden when Satan intimated that if man rebelled against God, they could be a free, moral agent? Isn't this what God's people have done throughout Redemptive History? Isn't this what is prophesied to be the disposition of the church in the last days?

2 Timothy 4:3-4, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths."

This is the way of sin in the life of the believer. May God give us the grace to guard our hearts!

Isaiah 30:12-14, "Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel, 'Since you have rejected this word, and have put your trust in oppression and guile, and have relied on them, therefore this iniquity will be to you like a breach about to fall, a bulge in a high wall, whose collapse comes suddenly in an instant. And whose collapse is like the smashing of a potter's jar; so ruthlessly shattered that a sherd [a piece of clay] will not be found among its pieces to take fire from a hearth, or to scoop water from a

cistern.”

Judah’s downfall ultimately is traced to their rejection of the word of God. When this occurs in your life, the walls that protect you from rebellion, wickedness, deceit, despair, and so much more truly are decimated. To reject the word of the Lord is to be as a “city without walls” vulnerable to any and all attack.

Were the people of Isaiah’s day listening? If they were and they were convicted of their sin of rebelling against God’s word, what ought they to do? All of the sudden pick up God’s word, read it, and act like nothing ever happened? NO! God gives us the answer.

Isaiah 30:15a, “For thus the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said, ‘In repentance and rest you shall be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength.’”

What an incredible statement! It is counter-intuitive and yet that which is the “secret” of all faithful servants of the Lord. You want to be a man of strength? You want to stand firm in your conviction and faith even though the world might oppose you? You want your children to be men and women of God? Based on this passage we must teach them three things.

- Repentance: Which is a turning not just from sin, but from self-trust, self-confidence, and self-perception unto to...
- Rest: Which is the essence of faith and so reliance. What ought a people to do who have rejected God’s word? They must cease relying upon themselves and their faulty and limited view of reality and so turn to undistracted trust/reliance upon Christ! And what will be the result? A life of...
- Quietness: Which denotes the absence of panic and restlessness. David spoke of this when he said...

Psalm 131, “O Lord, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty; nor do I involve myself in great matters, or in things too difficult for me. Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; like a weaned child *rests* against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever.”

The key to a strong and vibrant walk is NOT at first doing this or that, BUT turning from self-trust unto Christ wherein we trust Him to do and be all that He says He will do and be! Yet sadly in our sin, this is the exact opposite of what we do.

Isaiah 30:15b-17, “But you were not willing, and you said, ‘No, for we will flee on horses,’ therefore you shall flee! ‘And we will ride on swift *horses*,’ therefore those who pursue you shall be swift. One thousand *shall flee* at the threat of one *man*, you shall flee at the threat of five; until you are left as a flag on a mountain top, and as a signal on a hill.”

Herein is God’s first response to His children when they reject Him and go it alone: He disciplines them with their sin.

- You want horses? You got ‘em in the form of an army that will devastate you on horseback!
- You want a speedy retreat? You got it in the form of how fast you will be ruined by your sin!

The result would be a devastation of epic proportions; such are the wages of sin! When we read Isaiah 28-35 we see this recurring theme.

- God's people are threatened and so called by God to trust Him.
- They rebel and endeavor to manage in their own strength and according to their own wisdom.

So that His people might not perish in their sin, the Lord disciplines them that they might: repent, rest, and be quieted! In fact it is this cycle that we see worked out in Hezekiah, which again is the reason why Isaiah ended this section on this historical note. This historical note is typical and a picture of what the nation as a whole was doing and going to do. When Hezekiah turned his focus and trust to the Babylonians, the Lord gave him and the nation the promise or exile. Yet and again it must be noted that God was not disowning His people here (though they disowned Him). Rather, the Lord deigned to discipline His people with a view toward their full restoration! And that is why Isaiah ended this entire section (Isaiah 1-39) on the sober note of judgment.

Isaiah 39:5-7, "Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the Lord of hosts, "Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left," says the Lord. "And *some* of your sons who shall issue from you, whom you shall beget, shall be taken away; and they shall become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.'"

It is on this note that Isaiah closed out his earthly preaching ministry to the people of God living in the prophet's generation! That is NOT to say that the book of Isaiah ends here (for Isaiah penned a series of oracles and exhortations to the generations yet to come- Isaiah 40-66). Yet this would be Isaiah's final words to his immediate generation.

Now over the course of the next 115 years, God's people would be threatened on numerous occasions, struggle with faithless kings and suffer under the leadership of Manasseh. All these things happened because they refused to trust the Lord! And what would be the divine response? Isaiah wasted no time in giving it to us. No sooner had he announced the judgment of the coming Babylonian exile, the prophet announced comfort.

Comfort

Isaiah 40:1-2, "'Comfort, O comfort My people,' says your God. 'Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.'"

In the Hebrew there is no break between the statement of judgment in Isaiah 39:5-8 and this word of consolation which was intended for God's people 115 years later! When the Babylonians fulfilled this prophecy and took the Southern Kingdom of Judah into exile! There is a 115 year gap of fulfillment between Isaiah 39:8 and Isaiah 40:1, yet in the text itself, there is no gap. In fact, in the scroll of Isaiah found amongst the documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls,² Isaiah 40:1 begins two lines from the bottom of the column where Isaiah 39:8 ends without any suggestion of a break or a new beginning. This is significant because in preaching of the disciplining work of God amongst His people, Isaiah allowed for no

separation between the rod of God and the comfort of God and neither should we. Truly, when it comes to the rod of God, the Bible is quick in the giving of assurance to the child of God.

Hebrews 12:6a, “For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines...”

Proverbs 3:12, “For whom the Lord loves He reprove, even as a father, the son in whom he delights.”

Revelation 3:19a, “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline...”

In fact, to be without discipline is to be bereft of a relationship with God.

Hebrews 12:7b, “...for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline?”

And this is the case in Isaiah 40 where the focus is on the “peaceful fruit of righteousness” here spoken about in these terms, “‘Comfort, O comfort My people,’ says your God!”

Now having said this, we must appreciate the fact that there was 115 years between the judgment which God promised His people on account of their sin AND the realization of His “comfort”! Feel the weight of this. Sin is not a light thing. It is heavy and will indeed wound and destroy. Furthermore, God won’t come and deliver us from its effects at the first sign that we have become uncomfortable with our sin; here God waited 115 years! It reminds me of Gorham Abbot’s words; speaking of the two men who were crucified along with Christ.

Sincere repentance is never too late, but late repentance is seldom sincere. The thief on the cross repented, and was pardoned in the last hour of his life. We have one such instance in scripture- that none might despair; and only one- that none might presume. (Abbot, 1833)

Similarly we conclude looking at Isaiah 39 & 40 that the word of comfort is given to the child of God when it comes to his sin that none might despair, but a gap of 115 years exists between the discipline and the consolation that none might presume! With this, let’s consider the passage before us in more detail.

The word *comfort*: נִחַם (*nichum*); as we shall see next time, this is a call to a chorus of servants to minister to the people of God in their grief on account of their sin. And what a call! The word *comfort* is a tender word which denotes a sigh, “*nichum*” (it is onomatopoeic). It was used to denote the compassion expressed to someone who is grieving over the death of a family member (Genesis 24:67; 37:35; 2 Samuel 10:2; Jeremiah 16:7) and so denoted deep and abiding comfort. Think of it! In the context of the death of a child or spouse, we long to give a word of consolation, a word which might make everything O.K. and leave the person in quiet peace but there are no words. Yet if there were, imagine holding the grieving one in your arms, whispering it in their ear, and then in an instance all the pain dissolving in a sigh, “*nichum!*”

That is the word that is used here. To a people facing the difficulty of being disciplined on account of their sin, God’s word and so promise is that at the end of it all is peace/satisfaction/contentment! J. N. Oswalt put it this way:

If dramatic effect is desired, the opening words of this verse can hardly be surpassed. Without any

transition or preparation, the repeated imperatives strike the hearer with sudden poignancy. But no longer is it the force of judgment... Here the directness and the power are to remind the people / of God's ultimate tenderness and kindness. How easy it is to forget this as we face the accumulated record of our crimes against him and at the same time get some glimpse of his towering moral perfection. Now it is as though the prophet says, 'Alright, so much for that. It's all true [the judgment/discipline], but it's not all there is to the truth...' (Oswalt, 1986, p. 49)

Family of God, if there was a word that could denote the effect of heaven on our person it would be the one before us! This truly is the end of all things; that place to which God is bringing us in His sanctifying love: comfort/נִחַם (nichum).

Now on what does this comfort rest? To be embroiled in a wrestling match with God is to be on the losing side of sin. We are going to be wounded and hurt- that is what the exile was all about! But what is the end of it all? Where is God bringing us in His disciplining love? The answer has three parts to it.

Isaiah 40:2a, "Speak kindly [lit. "speak upon the heart"] to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that [notice there are three "that's" here which comprise the message of comfort intended for a disciplined people] her warfare has ended..."

One must understand that every time we dive into sin, we declare war on God and He responds! Truly, He loves us too much to allow us free access to our sin. As such, He acts upon our declaration of war and so fights back- which is why in our lives sin continues to have a bite! From this perspective we note that it wasn't the Assyrians or Babylonians which brought God's people into exile, it was the people of God themselves! But get this, there always is a terminus to the battle! Either God wins in this life and we relent and so turn back to God; or upon our death we are transformed and so brought into the perfect state. In either case the struggle is swallowed up in peace for "our warfare has ended!" That is the first word of comfort: the assurance that all is at peace between us and God! Notice the next word of "comfort."

Isaiah 40:2b, "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed..."

The word "removed" is the language of sacrifice and so references the total and complete forgiveness that results when an offering has been accepted (cf. Leviticus 1:4; 22:27). We are talking about the forgiveness of sin, which raises the question: are you so familiar with the gospel that this statement has gotten old? The end of all discipline is the reminding of the sinner that their sin is forgiven! That is the "comfort" in mind here! Yet how did God remove the "iniquity" for which His people went into exile? How does God remove the "iniquity" which on account of his grace casts us into an exile of fear, sadness, loneliness, heaviness, and grief? The answer for this is one of the main themes of this entire section (Isaiah 40-55). That theme revolves around "The Servant."

Isaiah 42:1-3, "Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one *in whom* My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry out or raise *His* voice, nor make His voice heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish; He will faithfully bring forth justice."

Truly a major theme of Isaiah 40-55 is that of "The Servant!" And with this we ask: how would this servant

bring about the redemption of God's people and so the remission of their sin? We are introduced once again to "The Servant of God" with a physical description of Him.

Isaiah 53:2-3, "For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no *stately* form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. And like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him."

The idea behind this is that He was no Saul (a genetic freak when it came to his physical appearance; recall, to look at Saul was to have your breath taken away, he was that good looking). This wasn't Christ. He was ordinary and common in appearance, but NOT in His actions. The first thing we note about Christ is that when He came, He entangled Himself in our struggles such that today there is not a soul here that He doesn't understand or know intimately.

Isaiah 40:4, "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried [and sadly, our response... even today?...]; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted."

And yet it is not only us; God the Father was pleased to crush Him.

Isaiah 40:10a, "But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting *Him* to grief..."

Why was God pleased to crush Him? Because God made Him to be our guilt offering.

Isaiah 40:10b, "...If He would render Himself *as* a guilt offering..."

How did Christ become our "guilt offering"?

Isaiah 40:5-6, "But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him."

This is how Christ, the servant of God, addressed the "iniquity" of God's people; He died in their place! And yet you must see that Christ's actions as "The Servant of God" went way beyond His people at the time. Christ also had YOU in mind at His death. Christ is the one speaking in Isaiah 49:

Isaiah 49:5-6, "And now says the Lord, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, in order that Israel might be gathered to Him (for I am honored in the sight of the Lord, and My God is My strength), He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'"

Family of God, do you see the end of all your suffering, heartache, and pain on account of your sin? Through it all God gives you a greater understanding and appreciation of Christ's forgiveness! We go into exile that we might learn Christ! And that brings us to the final element of the "comfort" behind the disciplining hand of the Lord...

Isaiah 40:2, "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

This is an amazing statement! The word for "double" literally means "to fold over" or "to fold in half" (Exodus 26:9). Now there are two elements to this "folding over" which are part of this word: The first is the indication that there is far more to the forgiveness of sin than we could ever imagine in this life.

Job 11:5-6, Zophar said to Job, "But would that God might speak, and open His lips... and show you the secrets of wisdom! For sound wisdom has two sides..."

That is our word which here indicates a multifaceted reality which goes beyond human comprehension! Alex Motyer put it this way:

Divine wisdom is 'two-sided' in the sense that it always includes hidden realities beyond the reach of the human mind. So here [in Isaiah 40:2], the thought is not of an excessive punishment running beyond what the case required, but of a dealing with sin that includes realities beyond our comprehension. (Motyer, 1993, p. 275)

The second element of the "folding over" of our sin is a correspondence between our sin and its payment. When a paper is folded in half each side corresponds to the other. And so it is with our sin and Christ's payment! Recall the words Christ spoke on the cross:

John 19:30, "When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And He bowed His head, and gave up His spirit."

Don't ever forget that the phrase "It is finished" is a word of commerce which literally means, "Paid in full!" When Christ died on the cross, EVERY sin that you have or will ever commit was paid for!

This is the third element to the "comfort" which God gives to His people struggling as they experience the consequence of their sin. And what is it? God's payment has met their guilt and a whole lot more! Nothing possibly remains that could separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord! And it is for this realization that God brings us into exile on account of our sin!

So where is God bringing us when He disciplines us for sin? To the place of "comfort" whereby we know that

- 1) Our warfare with God is ended,
- 2) Our iniquity has been removed,
- 3) And our sin and the payment has been perfectly joined such that every sin- known and unknown- has been forgiven!

This realization ultimately is the purpose of all discipline and so struggle in the life of the child of God! All things that occur in this life ultimately are for, "...the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:6). In fact, we can say emphatically that when we forget the "comfort" of the gospel, it is then that we plunge headlong into sin, "For he who lacks these *qualities* is

blind or short-sighted, having forgotten *his* purification from his former sins” (2 Peter 1:9).

Truly God disciplines us that we might find our comfort in Christ, NOT a person, a work, a power, wealth, or any other created thing! Accordingly, let us not resent the bitter trial. Rather, let us understand its purpose and so ever and always re-acquaint ourselves with the grace and mercy of God! Truly in the words of Isaiah:

Isaiah 30:15a, “For thus the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said, ‘In repentance and rest you shall be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength.’”

End Notes:

¹ This is so important for the question oft-times is raised: Did the Biblical writers understand that they were recording Scripture? From this passage (and many more) the answer is, “Yes!” In fact, Isaiah understood that it not only was God’s word, but that it would...

² The document known as “Qa.”

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About the Preacher

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