

In the morning service we’ve been going through the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews says that in the past, God spoke to our fathers at many times and in many ways
by the prophets,
but in these last days he has spoken to us in his Son.

Aren’t you glad for that?

You don’t have to worry about the possibility that God will tell me
to take off my clothes and preach naked for three years!!

See! There are *all sorts of benefits to the New Covenant!!*

And as we walk through the oracles concerning the nations,
we keep seeing the centrality of Zion over and over.

The name “Zion” isn’t used in chapters 19-20,

but the idea of Zion is very present in verse 24 –

“In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria,
a blessing in the midst of the earth.”

Israel is very much the geographical center between Egypt and Assyria.

But Isaiah is asserting much more than geographical centrality!

Israel will be a blessing in the midst of the earth –

the place where God’s blessing goes forth to the superpowers of the age.

In other words, Zion is taking center stage here in the midst of the nations.

This is why I have suggested that the theme of this section of Isaiah is

“we have a strong city.”

Isaiah 13-27 forms the second major section of the book of Isaiah.

Chapters 13-23 will consist of oracles against the nations –

showing how the cities of man do not last – *cannot* last.

The LORD is indeed the sovereign God of history,

who governs all things according to the counsel of his holy will.

And in these chapters 13-27 God explains his purposes for the nations.

Zion is at the center of God’s purposes for the whole earth.

Chapters 13-23 set forth ten oracles concerning the nations.

Last time we hear the oracle against Moab.

Oracle	
Babylon	13:1-14:27
–	
The Year that King Ahaz died	14:28-32
Moab	15:1-16:14
Damascus	17:1-18:7
Egypt	19:1-25

Chapter 20 consists of a *sign* given in the middle of the ten oracles (five on either side).

wilderness of the sea	21:1-10
Dumah	21:11-12
Arabia	21:13-17
valley of vision	22:1-25
Tyre	23:1-18

These are all the nations involved in the middle eastern conflict of the late 8th-century.

Tonight we come to the fifth oracle against the nations –
 “an oracle concerning Egypt” –
 and in chapter 20, we have the central sign of the section
 (with five oracles on either side of the sign).

1. The Oracle Concerning Egypt (19:1-25)

Chapter 19 consists of the oracle concerning Egypt.

If, as we saw in ch 18, God is going to bring the tribute of the nations to Zion,
 on what basis will they come?

This oracle claims that the nations will be given equal standing with Israel!

This is especially shocking because Egypt was the first and chief enemy of God’s people.
 Just as the Spanish merchant ships feared the buccaneers of the 17th century,
 so also Israel had long viewed Egypt as their chief enemy.

But attitudes change – and as Assyria became more and more of a threat,
 many Israelites came to see Egypt as a potential ally.

But God had warned Israel not to go back to Egypt.

God has *good* in store for Egypt – but that will only come about through Israel –
 not the other way around!

God’s blessing will come *through* Abraham’s seed!

Read:

a. The Disintegration of Worship, Economics, and Politics (v1-15)

An oracle concerning Egypt.

*Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud
and comes to Egypt;
and the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence,
and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.*

Behold, Yahweh is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt.

Ancient near eastern religions frequently speak of their gods riding the clouds.

Isaiah here says, no Yahweh is the one who rides the clouds as his chariot.

He is the divine warrior who comes to do battle against his enemies.

Even the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence.

Egypt was attempting to throw off the yoke of the Assyrians.

Judah would be tempted to join their rebellion

(indeed even the good king Josiah would die in battle allied to Egypt).

But Isaiah warns that the Egyptians are not a safe refuge.

They will fight against each other.

This first section of the oracle speaks of the disintegration of worship, economics, and politics.

We start with an Egyptian civil war:

i. The LORD and the Idols: Civil War and the Fierce King (v2-4)

² *And I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians,
and they will fight, each against another
and each against his neighbor,
city against city, kingdom against kingdom;*

This well-describes what we saw last week – the Cushite takeover of Egypt –

which included widespread civil war

(many Egyptian rulers preferred the King of Cush to Pharaoh –

After all, a distant king is usually easier to ignore than a local one –

and a distant king needs “local leaders” to be in charge!).

But this is extremely common in human history.

When a country sees a dip in its power – or when a powerful ruler dies –

all the dissatisfaction that has been building up bursts forth.

And God says that he will confound the counsels of the Egyptians:

³ *and the spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out,
and I will confound^a their counsel;
and they will inquire of the idols and the sorcerers,*

and the mediums and the necromancers;

I think that we like to believe that we are immune to this.

We don't have idols.

We don't believe in sorcerers or mediums or necromancers!

So we're safe, right?

What is the modern equivalent of these things?

Well, Christianity has always forbidden sorcerers and the like –
but we still have similar tendencies...

In the late 12th century, there was an Italian abbot named Joachim of Fiore,
who spent a lot of time reflecting on the apocalyptic literature of the Bible.
As he reflected on what it was saying,

he concluded that there were three ages,
the age of the Father (the OT), the Age of the Son (NT),
and the Age of the Spirit (which was to come).

And he believed that the sign of the coming of the Age of the Spirit
would be the rise of two new orders of monks
who would preach the gospel to the nations.

And he set the date for this beginning of the Age of the Spirit in the year 1260.

Ten years after he died, the Franciscans and the Dominicans arose.

Others added to his prophecies – and soon they grew an expectation
that the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (who had died on crusade)
would return and crush the oppressors and bring peace and justice.

When a man appeared on Mt. Etna in 1260, claiming to be Frederick,
many rallied to him – and even some of the nobility –
resulting in another civil war in Germany.

In other words, we have traded sorcerers and mediums
for conspiracy theories and apocalyptic predictions!

But God says that that Egypt's trust in false gods will not end well!

*⁴ and I will give over the Egyptians
into the hand of a hard master,
and a fierce king will rule over them,
declares the Lord GOD of hosts.*

Idolatry results in oppression.

Economics takes a hit as well:

ii. The Nile and Its Commerce Dries Up (v5-10)

- ⁵ *And the waters of the sea will be dried up,
and the river will be dry and parched,*
- ⁶ *and its canals will become foul,
and the branches of Egypt's Nile will diminish and dry up,
reeds and rushes will rot away.*
- ⁷ *There will be bare places by the Nile,
on the brink of the Nile,
and all that is sown by the Nile will be parched,
will be driven away, and will be no more.*
- ⁸ *The fishermen will mourn and lament,
all who cast a hook in the Nile;
and they will languish
who spread nets on the water.*
- ⁹ *The workers in combed flax will be in despair,
and the weavers of white cotton.*
- ¹⁰ *Those who are the pillars of the land will be crushed,
and all who work for pay will be grieved.*

The economy of Egypt will be devastated,
symbolized by the drying up of the Nile.

The Nile River *is* the economy of Egypt.

Along the coast, Egypt receives between 1-8 inches of rain *per year*.
But when you get south of Cairo (south of the Nile Delta),
there is *no rain*.

The *only* source of water is the Nile River.
If the Nile River dries up – everyone dies!

Isaiah does not say that the whole river will dry up –
only that the *branches* of the Nile will dry up.

The Nile Delta is a region 150 miles wide and 100 miles long.
In the ancient world there were seven main branches (now there are only two).
And also in the ancient world, the Delta would flood every year –
which no longer happens, ever since the construction of the Aswan Dam.

But the picture that Isaiah gives us is of a Nile River that is sick –
a Nile River that no longer provides the water needed for the Egyptian economy.

The farmers and fishermen, the weavers and clothing makers will be in despair –

because there is no water.

The Egyptians trust in the Nile.

This is why they are so concerned right now about the Ethiopian project
to build a new dam on the Blue Nile!
If Ethiopia restricts the water supply to Egypt,
then Egypt will die.

But the economics of Egypt is bound together with the politics of Egypt:

iii. The Foolish Princes and Their Stupid Counsel (v11-15)

¹¹ *The princes of Zoan are utterly foolish;
the wisest counselors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel.*

How can you say to Pharaoh,

*“I am a son of the wise,
a son of ancient kings”?*

¹² *Where then are your wise men?*

Let them tell you

that they might know what the LORD of hosts has purposed against Egypt.

Wise counselors will always consider the purposes of the LORD!

God frequently allows nations to “get away” with things for decades – even centuries!

But if you ignore God, if you assume that God will never do anything...

then you are setting yourself up for trouble.

If the counselors of Pharaoh were truly wise,

then they would remember the Exodus –

they would remember what the LORD did hundreds of years before,
when he led Israel out of Egypt.

But:

¹³ *The princes of Zoan have become fools,
and the princes of Memphis are deluded;
those who are the cornerstones of her tribes
have made Egypt stagger.*

¹⁴ *The LORD has mingled within her a spirit of confusion,
and they will make Egypt stagger in all its deeds,
as a drunken man staggers in his vomit.*

¹⁵ *And there will be nothing for Egypt
that head or tail, palm branch or reed, may do.*

When you forget the LORD – when you leave him out of your plans –

even your wise men are as fools, giving stupid counsel to Pharaoh.

When you look around at the advice given to our rulers today,
you can easily see the same thing:

“The LORD has mingled within her a spirit of confusion,”
and the counselors “will make Egypt stagger in all its deeds.”

Economists tend to think that market forces – or class struggle – explains everything.
Politicians and pollsters seek to read (and shape) popular opinion.

But it is exceedingly rare to find the wise men of this age
calling for people to pay attention to what God says.

And so God’s words to Egypt are well-aimed at our day as well.

And in part 2, Isaiah speaks of five things that will happen “in that day” –
the Day of the LORD.

b. “In That Day” – Judgment Means Hope for the Nations (v16-25)

i. Egypt Will Tremble (v16-17)

¹⁶ In that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with fear before the hand that the LORD of hosts shakes over them. ¹⁷ And the land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians. Everyone to whom it is mentioned will fear because of the purpose that the LORD of hosts has purposed against them.

First, the Egyptians will be like women and tremble with fear. (16-17)
But why are they trembling with fear?

It is not Assyria that they fear, but “the land of Judah.”
The land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians.

At first, you might think that this is simply a terror of judgment that leads to destruction.
But as you keep going, you begin to see that this is the true fear of the LORD!

ii. Five Cities in Egypt Will Swear Allegiance to Yahweh (v18)

¹⁸ In that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD of hosts. One of these will be called the City of Destruction.^[b]

Because, second, five cities in the land of Egypt will speak the language of Canaan
and swear allegiance to the LORD of Hosts. (18)

We don’t know exactly what is meant by “one will be called the city of destruction” –
but there is likely a connection being made with Joshua’s conquest of Canaan.

In Joshua’s day, Jericho was utterly destroyed – devoted to destruction.
The rest of the cities of Canaan were generally preserved.

The idea here is that the five cities of Egypt will turn to the LORD –
and thus there will be no need for a Jericho.

One of the five cities will take the name “city of destruction”
because Egypt will *remember* what the LORD of Hosts does to rebellious cities!!

**iii. There Will Be an Altar to the LORD in Egypt and He Will Save Them
(v19-22)**

¹⁹ In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border. ²⁰ It will be a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt.

And thus, third, Egypt will build an altar to Yahweh,
just like the eastern tribes of Israel did in Joshua 22.

It will be a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt.
There was a Jewish community in Egypt that built a temple to the LORD.
And many Egyptians joined themselves to it.
(After the destruction of the temple in 586 BC,
it is possible that the ark of the covenant was taken to that temple).

But that temple falls short of what Isaiah is saying here.

It was a sign and a picture of this promise –
but only a handful of Egyptians ever worshiped there –
and it was never the place where *Egypt* gathered to cry to the LORD.

And yet, Isaiah says in verse 20:
When they cry to the LORD because of oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and deliver them. ²¹ And the LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them. ²² And the LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them.

God’s purpose for Egypt is to strike and heal Egypt –
just like his purpose for Israel is to strike and heal Israel.

This is his purpose for humanity!
What happened to China in the 20th century?
God struck China with Mao Zedong.
Chairman Mao of the Communist Party set out to eradicate religion.
In the end, he succeeded at preparing the way
for the single greatest evangelistic effort in the history of the world!

In striking China with Mao Zedong, God used him to bring healing to tens of millions!

So don't be so certain that if "so-and-so" comes to power, we're all doomed!
God uses very strange tools to accomplish his purposes!

After all, anyone who looked at Jesus would not have guessed
that he was the one who would be the Savior of the World!

Never mind the unbelievers – consider those who were faithful!
After the crucifixion, they said, "We had thought that he was the one to redeem Israel..."

They did not understand the power of the cross!

And – too often – neither do we.

iv. There Will Be a Highway from Egypt to Assyria (v23)

²³ *In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.*

But fourth, there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria,
and *both* will worship Yahweh in that day.

Stop thinking that you have to side with *either* Egypt *or* Assyria.
Both are hostile to God (right now).
And both will be converted to him.

v. Israel, Egypt, and Assyria – the Blessing to the Nations (v24-25)

²⁴ *In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth,*

And fifth, in that day Israel, Egypt and Assyria will indeed be allied under Yahweh.
And Yahweh of hosts will bless Egypt and Assyria with Israel in that day.
(Read 25)

²⁵ *whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance."*

Isaiah warns against entering into alliances with Egypt,
because God is first going to judge Egypt,
their immediate plans will fail, because they do not serve Yahweh.
But Yahweh will bring them into his people,
and then they will be allied with both Israel and Assyria in the service of God.

But if God can bring such bitter enemies as Egypt and Assyria,
and bring them together in his service,
then indeed all the world will serve him!

This happened.

On the day of Pentecost we hear of Jews and Jewish converts who were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, and more. God poured his Spirit upon both Assyrians and Egyptians in that day. By the fourth century, the Christian church had taken over both Egypt and Assyria.

The gospel indeed conquered both regions, and both became leaders in the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth.

But Isaiah, how shall we know that this will happen?

This sounds absurd!

Egypt and Assyria are bitter enemies, and both hate the God of Jacob.

2. The Sign of the Naked Prophet (20:1-6)

20 In the year that the commander in chief, who was sent by Sargon the king of Assyria, came to Ashdod and fought against it and captured it—² at that time the LORD spoke by Isaiah the son of Amoz, saying, “Go, and loose the sackcloth from your waist and take off your sandals from your feet,” and he did so, walking naked and barefoot.

And so Isaiah gives a sign of what will happen soon.

When Sargon sent his commander to capture the city of Ashdod (Philistine), God told Isaiah to walk naked and barefoot for three years. Then Yahweh said (verse 3-6).

³ Then the LORD said, “As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush,^[c] ⁴ so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptian captives and the Cushite exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, the nakedness of Egypt. ⁵ Then they shall be dismayed and ashamed because of Cush their hope and of Egypt their boast. ⁶ And the inhabitants of this coastland will say in that day, ‘Behold, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped and to whom we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria! And we, how shall we escape?’”

As Philistia has fallen, so will Egypt and Cush.

No earthly power can protect you from the Assyrians.
If you put your hope in the power of the nations,
then you will be betrayed and abandoned.

The oracles concerning the nations speak of the sovereignty of God, in judgment, but also in blessing.

God will bring the glory of the nations to Zion,
and he will raise up even Egypt and Assyria to join Israel in his worship.

Where is your hope?

We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel...

Your hope is in a crucified Messiah.

Your hope is in the one who was led away naked and barefoot...
to the cross.

If your hope is in political strategy – then you will *not be ready* when they come for you!

If your hope is in economic success – then you will crumple when the economy crashes.

But if your hope is in the suffering Servant of the LORD –

the savior and defender who hears the one who cries out to him for mercy –
then he will hear your pleas for mercy and heal you.