

## Isaiah 22:15-25 A Steward in God's House

### **Prayer for Illumination:**

O LORD, our great God, our souls are humbled to ask that You might give us life according to Your Word. Teach us Your statutes. Make us understand the way of Your precepts. Cause us to meditate on Your wondrous works. As we melt away in our vain strength, strengthen us according to Your Word. Put false ways far from us and graciously teach us Your law. We have chosen the way of faithfulness; we have set Your rules before us; we cling to Your testimonies, O LORD; let us not be put to shame. We will run in the way of Your commandments, Holy Spirit, when You enlarge our hearts. O, enlarge our hearts as we receive Your Word now. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **Read Isaiah 22:15-25**

There is a folk tale about Alfred the Great, King of England, that when his army was scattered by a Viking host, he fled alone into the marshes and came upon an old woodcutter's cottage. The king, looking rather like a pauper than a prince, asked for food and a place to lay his head. The woodcutter's wife had pity on the disheveled man and sat him by the hearth. She told him to watch the cakes that were baking over the fire while she tended to other matters. The king, wallowing in self-pity, allowed his mind to wander through his troubles, forgetting all about the cakes. When the old woman came back into the cottage smoke was rolling from the fire where the cakes were burning and ruined. She scolded her guest for failing in such a simple responsibility and gave him a lesson in stewardship. Justly upbraided, the king returned to the field, rallied his troops, and eventually rid the realm of the Viking scourge.

In our text, Isaiah, you might say, assumes the role of the woodcutter's wife. God sends him to rebuke the King's steward, Shebna, for promoting his selfish ambitions instead of paying attention to the needs of the kingdom. He prophesies Shebna's downfall, but also promises that God will replace him with a godly steward, Eliakim. The particular office in view here is that of the "steward" or "one who is over the household" (v. 15). This officer over the household was the highest royal official, second only to the king. In 2 Chron. 26.27 we see that this office could actually be held by the heir apparent. This steward was entrusted with the affairs of state and the welfare of the people. What made Shebna's failure so odious was that these were God's people, and he was representing the royal house of David, who represented God's rule over His covenant people. This should be very sobering for all who are in leadership, especially for those who lead God's people. God expects the same character and principles from all Christian leaders, whether their leadership is in the Church, a business, the military, an educational institution, or the home. But God is especially jealous for His people, who are called by His name. So He appoints leaders of His people to be stewards of those that He loves. Ultimately, though, He takes the life of His people into His own hands, as the Second Person of the Trinity, the eternal Son, becomes flesh and fulfills the office of the Servant of the Lord, the faithful steward, and the Royal Son of David, the eternal King.

So, what we see here is that **God appoints stewards to care for His Kingdom, but our only security is in Jesus the King.**

This morning we will note several characteristics of Christian leadership. These are not ten steps to growing your church or business. These are not ten characteristics of the most successful leaders. We will look at ten qualities of Christian lead-

ership that can help us glorify God and serve His kingdom.

The ten qualities or characteristics are:

1. Pragmatism must not trump principle.
2. Self must not trump service.
3. Leadership expects greater strictness in judgment.
4. Leadership is first a service to God.
5. Leadership is delegated authority answerable to God.
6. Leadership reflects the character and care of God.
7. Leadership influence bestows the goods of the Kingdom for the glory of the Kingdom.
8. Leadership provides stability by consistent trust in the LORD.
9. Leadership promotes honor through impartial treatment and judgment.
10. Leadership ultimately looks to and points to Jesus as the security and hope of God's people.

We will look at these ten qualities under three main points from the text. **First, God will severely judge those stewards who abuse His people. Second, God will call faithful stewards to care for His people. And third, God has appointed Jesus, the King, as the only security for His people.** As the text unfolds in these three parts we will observe the ten qualities of leadership along the way.

**First, God will severely judge those stewards who abuse His people (22:15-19).** God has two charges against Shebna. The first charge flows out of the larger context. Last week we looked at verses 1-14, and noted that God condemned Judah for looking to human strength rather than looking to the LORD for salvation. Verses 15-19 hone in on one particular person responsible for this wrongheaded policy of looking to international alliances and trusting in military fortifications instead of following God. This situation recalls what Isaiah had said in 3:12, "O My people, your guides mislead you." God accused

Shebna for his God-defying stewardship, in which he misled God's people. Verbal and contextual links between vv. 15-25 and vv. 1-14 indicate that Shebna was the official within Hezekiah's administration that promoted the pro-Egyptian and pro-Babylonian policies and alliances to resist Assyrian hegemony which would lead to Judah's near decimation under God's judgment. Rather than listening to God's law that forbade alliances with idol worshipping nations, Shebna made policies based on opinion polls, statistics, and international propaganda. Babylon boasted a successful campaign against Assyrian dominance in their region, and promised they could achieve the same for Judah. Intelligence reported on Assyria's military strength, indicating that they were stretched too thin to maintain control of Palestine, Egypt, and Babylonia. The political pundits insisted that Judah could not stand on her own against this enemy, so the best bet was to combine forces with Egypt and Babylon. Gallup, Barna, and the Jerusalem Times indicated that the majority of people were in favor of joining this coalition.

So, what does Shebna do? Does he stand on principle, and say, "My conscience and policies are held captive to the word of God?" Or, does he go with what looks like the more practical path? In his case, pragmatism trumps principle. Or, we might say, pragmatism is the reigning principle for him. If it works, do it. If it looks like it will work, do it. For this rejection of God's law in favor what appears to work, Shebna falls under the same condemnation that the Kingdom of Judah came under in verses 1-14 for their faithlessness. Here we see a quality of leadership: *Pragmatism must not trump principle in Christian leadership*. The malls tried to convince Truett Cathy that closing on Sunday's would hurt the profitability of Chic-fil-a. When that did not persuade him to close on Sunday some malls fined them for closing on Sunday. But Cathy stood on

the principle of God's Word to "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." Whether it cost him profits or not, he was controlled by a higher principle. As a leader, you must not merely ask, "What works?" you must ask, "What is right? Is this right in the eyes of God?"

God charged Shebna for God-defying stewardship. But that was not all. God accused Shebna for his self-serving stewardship. The charge in verse 15 begins with the icy appellation "this steward," which even in the Hebrew has a derogatory tone. Shebna is cited in these verses for his self-promotion, or self-aggrandizement. The word "here" repeated three times in verse 16, indicates that Shebna was indulging inappropriate liberty. The questions indicate that Shebna has overstepped his prerogatives by carving out his tomb among the royalty of the house of David. When we compare the words, "a tomb on the height . . . in the rock" from verse 16 with the words of 2 Chron. 32:33, "and they buried [Hezekiah] in the upper part of the tombs of the sons of David," it becomes apparent that Shebna was arrogating too high of a privilege to himself. Further illustrating his arrogance, Isaiah uses the words "cut out" and "carve," which describe the work of fine artisans, not typical laborers for burial places, but for monuments. So, he was not just digging a tomb for himself, he was seeking an enduring monument to himself as a "big man" in the house of David. What makes this scene all the more alarming is that he was doing this while Judah and Jerusalem are under threat of war, and perhaps experiencing initial signs of the oncoming conflict. He was putting himself above the welfare of the nation. Again, Shebna negatively illustrates another quality of leadership: *Self must not trump service in Christian leadership*. In fact, a Christian leader will often have to set aside his own interests and personal aspirations in order to really serve those whom he is called to lead. A godly husband does not lord his

authority over his wife, always insisting on his preferences, while he appeals to Ephesians 5 to justify his selfishness. Christian parents sacrifice many personal desires in order to give their children a better home life, or a better education. A Christian businessman may take a cut in his own salary so that he can retain an employee for the good of the company and that employee. An ungodly commander may allow a subordinate soldier to take the blame for the commander's own error in judgment to keep his record clean. But a Christian leader will put principle and service before self-promotion. Jesus said, "Whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:44).

How serious does God take the abuse of authority? God severely judged Shebna for his unprincipled, self-serving stewardship. In verses 17-18 Isaiah said, "Behold, the LORD will hurl you away violently, O you strong man. He will seize firm hold on you and whirl you round and round, and throw you." "Strong man" has a mocking tone. Shebna thought he was so important. Puffed up with pride, he imagined himself to be this great warrior-prince. But in very hands-on, personal language, God says that He will meet Shebna, like Royce Gracie meeting some muscle-head in the Octagon and making him tap out in thirty seconds. He says that the LORD will lay hold on him and work him into a little ball and then toss him into another country! He says he will throw him "into a wide land. There you shall die." The prominence and permanence he hoped to have memorialized in Jerusalem will never be. Isaiah says with derision, "and there shall be your glorious chariots, you shame of your master's house." All of his self-wrought honor will be stripped away. All that remains is the shameful memory of his fall. He had exalted himself above the well-being of Judah. Now, God says, "I will thrust you from your office, and you will be pulled down from your station" (v. 19).

This illustrates yet another quality of Christian leadership. *Leadership expects greater strictness in judgment.* James 3:1 warns our uber-egalitarian culture, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 1 Pet. 5:1-4 says that those elders who lead God’s people with integrity will receive from the Great Shepherd “the unfading crown of glory.” This is encouraging, while also reminding us that, as Heb. 13:17 says, we watch over the souls of those in our care “as those who must give an account.” Paul could say to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:26-27 that he was innocent of their blood because he did not shrink from declaring to them the whole counsel of God. He was alluding to the accountability of those called to proclaim God’s truth, which we see so clearly in Ezekiel’s call in Ezek. 3:16-21. There Ezekiel is told that he is a watchman. If the watchman sees the enemy coming and fails to warn the city, then their blood will be on his hand. But if he sees the enemy coming and warns the city, but they still do not rise to the defense of the city, then they will die, but their blood will be on their own heads and not on the watchman’s hands. So, if Ezekiel preaches the truth of God’s judgment to Judah, then he will be free of their blood even if they refuse to listen. But if he shrinks back from proclaiming God’s truth, then they will die in their sins, but their blood God will require at Ezekiel’s hands. My brothers who handle the Word of God, I exhort you not to do what so many are doing today, who shrink from declaring the whole counsel of God, and therefore limit their message to a canon within the canon. If your doctrine of grace is such that you have no place in your theology or preaching for statements such as, “If you sow to the flesh you will reap corruption;” or “I tell you as I told you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of heaven.” If your gospel does not comprehend the

whole counsel of God, then you are forming a canon within the canon, and I fear that you will have blood on your hands.

In Shebna, we see very clearly that God will severely judge those stewards who abuse His people. Secondly, **God will call faithful stewards to care for His people (22:20-24)**. There will be Shebnas in this inaugural era of the kingdom, but thankfully, God will also raise up Eliakims. The first thing that we note in verse 20 is that Eliakim does not seek this office for his own elevation, but in response to God's call. God will call Eliakim to be His steward. With the words "I will call" we are reminded that leadership for Christians is a vocation, not just a job. A job is just something that needs doing. A vocation is an assignment from God that fits into His grand design for the glory of His kingdom. And every legitimate vocation is ennobled by this fact, no matter how insignificant it might seem in the eyes of the world. I worked with a man on the nightshift at UPS whose day job was a Raleigh sanitation worker. His name was John Wiggins. I don't think I will ever forget John, because he drove a garbage truck with such joy in the Lord for the glory of God, that he could not have honored God more if he had been riding in the back of the presidential limo. On the other hand, a president can be self-serving and godless, bringing that high office into disrepute.

God bestows such great honor on Eliakim with that beautiful description, "My servant." This foreshadows the Servant of the LORD who redeems and rules God's people, as recorded in the Servant Songs of Isaiah 42-61. This is but one indication that Eliakim is a type of Christ, whose faithful stewardship foreshadows the service of Christ in the kingdom. I will say more on that in a few minutes. Eliakim came to this office with a calling from God, with the consequence that he knew that he served at the pleasure of God and for the glory of God.



His service was not foremost to the people of Judah. His service to them was subordinate to his service to God. Leaders, you are first and foremost God's servant. *Leadership is first a service to God.* So do all that you do joyfully as unto the Lord.

Next, we note that in order that Eliakim might have the ability to fulfill his duty to God, God will invest Eliakim with authority. Verse 21: "I will clothe him with your robe; and I will bind your sash on him; and I will commit your authority to his hand." It is emphatic that Eliakim's authority is not inherent in his person. It is delegated from God. Therefore, his authority is answerable to God. Here is another quality of Christian leaders. They know that *Leadership is delegated authority answerable to God.* Our elders know that we don't own the house. We are stewards appointed by the Master of the House to care for the household. When He comes, we will have to give an answer for how we cared for His people and handled His resources. Since all authority is instituted by God (Romans 13), whether emperors, kings, presidents, teachers, CEOs, parents, and so on, all Christians who are in leadership must remember that your authority is delegated, and the one who placed you in leadership will have an account from you in the end. This is sobering, but because the Master of the House is kind and generous it is also encouraging.

Now, because a Christian leader's authority is delegated from God, he is to use that authority as an expression of the goodness of God. He is to resemble the goodness of God in the way he leads. This leads us to verse 21, where we discover that God's fatherly care will be expressed through Eliakim's administration. "He shall be a father," says Isaiah. Just as God cares for His kingdom like a father, and just as the Messiah was called "Everlasting Father" of His people in chapter 9, so Eliakim would work to provide, protect, and faithfully guide

the people of Judah. Whether you are leading in a church or somewhere else in this world which God rules, if you are a Christian you must ask yourself how your leadership reflects on the character of God. *Leadership reflects the character and care of God for His people.*

Leadership involves some degree of influence in people's lives and perhaps in organizations. Isaiah indicates that God will entrust Eliakim with significant influence with the words, "I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." The words "place on his shoulder" in verse 22 echo the Messianic prophecy of 9:6 where the Messiah has the government upon His shoulder. This pictures the great responsibility for impacting the lives of God's people and the administration of His kingdom. "The key of the house of David" may have been both a functioning key and a symbol of his authority to control access to the king as well as to administer funds from the king's treasury, which influences the policies of the kingdom, especially the beneficiaries of the King. The "house of David" points to Messianic nature of the throne in Jerusalem. This was no small influence. This was a precious people, the people of the Lord. The house of David was a covenanted people. They had a special relationship with God through the Davidic covenant in which God promised David that he would have a throne that would endure forever, and that one of his sons would always sit on his throne. Eliakim, the Lord's servant, was called by God and entrusted with the keys to this house, this kingdom!

Centuries later, Jesus, the Son of David, would give this authority to Peter, and later to the Church, as recorded in Matt. 16:19 and 18:18. The "keys of the kingdom of heaven" were for binding and loosing, as the preaching of the gospel opened

the door to the throne room of the Christ and opened the treasury of heaven to bestow His blessings on the citizens of the kingdom, those who believe the gospel of Christ. This power also involves the painful binding of shutting one out of the throne room, when an unrepentant person refuses to confess their sin as sin and to turn to the Lord Jesus Christ. I know this is hard to imagine in our culture, where we conceive of salvation in purely individualistic terms of everything I do being between me and Jesus, but Jesus actually says, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. This is no trifling matter. This is profound responsibility that applies particularly to the elders of the church. *Leadership influence bestows the goods of the Kingdom for the glory of the Kingdom (God).*

One benefit of Eliakim’s influence is that God will establish Eliakim for Judah’s stability. He will be “a peg in a secure place” (v. 23). It would be Eliakim’s policy of trust in God rather than in godless alliances with the nations that would secure Jerusalem against the king of Assyria’s siege. When the Rabshakeh, the official of Assyria, parallel in authority to Eliakim, came to Jerusalem with threats and mocking Judah’s trust in God, Eliakim could remain silent because he knew that the king was following his policy of prayer and trust in God. Indeed, God answered Hezekiah’s prayers by striking down 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night and causing the king of Assyria to hear a rumor that took him back to Assyria, only to be assassinated by his sons. Shebna had followed a policy of distrust in God and misplaced trust in human strength, which led to terrible losses in Judah. Eliakim followed a policy of consistent trust in the LORD, which gave Jerusalem stability in turbulent times. Note here another quality of Christian leaders. *Leadership*

*provides stability by consistent trust in the LORD.* What's your policy?

Next we see that God will establish Eliakim for Judah's honor. He will be "a throne of honor" (v. 23), and an "honor of his father's house" (v. 24). The house probably extends to the clan or tribe, namely Judah, although some interpret this verse negatively as indicating nepotism, and so understand "father's house" very literally as only his immediate family. I believe nepotism is actually the opposite of what is intended here. It seems rather that the "offspring and issue, every small vessel, from the cups to all the flagons" are pictures of all sorts of people, high and low. Common pots and fine china all receive impartial justice as integral parts of the household. So this verse speaks to the impartiality of his administration. His policy of faith and trust in God, paying attention to God's law, would lead to overflowing righteousness and justice for all. The world's leadership philosophy says to do favors for those from whom you expect favors later. So you twist justice in order to favor those that you believe will be the most help to you down the road. This breeds corruption and injustice, as Isaiah routinely decries throughout his oracles of judgment. Leaders who are Christians must not follow this philosophy and strategy of the world. It may lead you up the corporate ladder, or keep you climbing the ranks in the military, but one day you will have to answer to God for self-serving partiality, and then it will cost you dearly, as Paul warned the leaders of the church in Corinth, "If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:15). On the other hand, impartiality leads to honor and glory for a leader and for those that he leads. It maintains the dignity of humanity, made in the image of God, and honors the wisdom and law of God. So we see yet

another quality of Christian leaders. *Leadership promotes honor through impartial treatment and judgment.*

**We have seen first, that God will severely judge those stewards who abuse His people. Second, that God will call faithful stewards to care for His people.** But the final verse of this text shows us that the steward, no matter how good, could not finally sustain the government of God's people upon his shoulders. He is a steward, after all, and not the King. This is why, thirdly, **God has appointed Jesus, the King, as the only security for His people (22:25).** "The peg that was fastened in a secure place will give way, it will be cut down and fall, and the load that was on it will be cut off." No steward of the Kingdom can bear the load of the King; any attempt to do so, or any attempt to make him do so, will end in failure.

Eliakim was not capable of influencing Hezekiah's administration in the end to trust solely in God. He effectively saw Judah through the Assyrian crisis, but Hezekiah's flirtations with Babylon and the rise of his evil son, King Manasseh, were portents of hard days ahead. But the Messianic hints in Eliakim's appointment point us away from Eliakim to the Anointed Son of David who would fulfill the prophecy of Isa. 9:6 (that the government would be upon His shoulder and His name would be called 'Everlasting Father'), as well as the Servant Songs of chapters 42-61. It is of Jesus that God the Father would truly speak when He said, "My servant." But Jesus is not just "the Servant of the Lord." He is not merely a steward over the household. And it is as the King, not the steward of the house, that Revelation 3:7 speaks of Jesus as the fulfillment of this royal hope: "The words of the Holy One, the True One, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens." It is ultimately, not the Church, but Jesus who forbids or welcomes to His throne. It is Jesus who opens the treasury of heaven, rich blessings to bestow. Lead-

ers are instruments that He chooses to use to accomplish his good purposes in our lives. But He is the King, while leaders are but stewards. And every good steward is going to look to the King for his own help. The steward will rely on the King for wisdom and power. *And* he will point others to Jesus as their only true security. The good steward, the Christian leader, will say, “However God would choose to use me in your life, you must know that I am not your security, I am not your safety, I am not your savior. You must not look to me, except to see me pointing you to Jesus Christ. He is your Savior. He is your security. He is your God.” Here is the final and most important quality of a Christian leader: *Leadership ultimately looks to and points to Jesus as the security and hope of God’s people.*

**So, God appoints stewards to care for His Kingdom, but our only security is in Jesus the King.** In whatever capacity of leadership the Lord would place you, may these qualities be in you by His grace and for His glory.

Let us pray:

O Lord God of hosts, You have indeed spoken. As we do not doubt that Your word of judgment was fulfilled upon Shebna, and Your word of promise was fulfilled for Eliakim, so we pray that You would keep us from the God-defying and self-serving path of the former, and give us the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to lead like the latter. May we be to the praise of Your glorious grace both now and forever. Through Christ we pray. Amen.