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The Folly of Trusting Man

Hebrews 11 is one of the more beautiful passages of Scripture. It not only contains an inspiring call for each of us to rely upon Christ in and through all things, but it says it so wonderfully.

Hebrews 11:32-34, "And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed *acts of righteousness*, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight."

Now we read this passage and respond in our minds with a resounding "Amen! God give me such a faith!" But when it comes to where we live, I don't think we are so convinced. *Yes, I am an alien and so a sojourner in this land... but I've got a house to care for and a family to feed. I'm glad that through faith "the mouths of lion's were shut" and "armies were put to flight"; yet if I don't live among the Romans as a Roman, I'll lose my job!*

What does faith look like today? In our world? In the 21st Century? Does it mean “letting go and letting God”? Or does it involve a more active life?

It is to this question that Isaiah wrote. His generation was suffering under the turmoil of war, false religion, godless leadership, and national compromise. Isaiah endeavored to demonstrate two things:

1. The folly of trusting man, and
2. The blessing, content, and delight of the life of Faith/Dependence upon God!

He did this by giving his generation an exposé of the folly of man.

<u>Isaiah 13-20</u>	<u>Isaiah 21-23</u>	<u>Isaiah 24-27</u>
<i>Isaiah 13:1-14:27</i>	<i>Isaiah 21:1-10</i>	<i>Isaiah 24:1-20</i>
The Futility of National Dependence		
<i>Isaiah 14:28-32</i>	<i>Isaiah 21:11-12</i>	<i>Isaiah 24:21-23</i>
The Reign and Rule of God		
<i>Isaiah 15:1-16:14</i>	<i>Isaiah 21:13-17</i>	<i>Isaiah 25:1-12</i>
The Peril of Pride		
<i>Isaiah 17:1-18:7</i>	<i>Isaiah 22:1-25</i>	<i>Isaiah 26:1-21</i>
The Folly of Man-Trust		
<i>Isaiah 19:1-20:6</i>	<i>Isaiah 23:1-18</i>	<i>Isaiah 27:1-13</i>
God's Unthwartable, Mind-Blowing Plan		

Isaiah’s fourth message to the people of God is the folly of trusting man. He begins in the first two sections giving a review of the folly of trusting foreign nations or man. Then in light of the review, he closes his treatment in the last section with a discourse on the life of faith!

Isaiah first reviews the failure of national dependence.

The Failure of National Dependence

Isaiah gives three reasons why foreign, national dependence won’t work. He began with the failed coalition which Israel forged with Syria.

Isaiah 17:1-3, “The oracle concerning Damascus [which was the capital of Syria/Aram]. ‘Behold, Damascus is about to be removed from being a city, and it will become a fallen ruin. The cities of

Aroer are forsaken; they will be for flocks to lie down in, and there will be no one to frighten *them*. The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim [which is Israel], and sovereignty from Damascus and the remnant of Aram; they will be like the glory of the sons of Israel,' declares the Lord of hosts."

We are familiar with this history. When the threat of Assyria began to be felt amongst the various and sundry nations living in Palestine, two kingdoms sought to address the threat by combining their forces! These kingdoms were Aram/Syria and the northern Kingdom of Israel (the people of God)! Recall, this is the background of Isaiah 7. This northern coalition put pressure on the Southern Kingdom of Judah to join their coalition with the threat that if Judah didn't join, the coalition would attack it them!

Well, Ahaz, the king of Judah, refused to join the coalition, but he did not do this trusting God. Rather, He appealed to the Assyrians themselves for protection (2 Kings 16:7). Now looking just at the northern Kingdom of Israel; what consequence did their trusting in Damascus hold for them?

Isaiah 17:4-5, "Now it will come about in that day that the glory of Jacob will fade [the 'glory of Jacob' is a reference to Israel], and the fatness of his flesh will become lean. It will be even like the reaper gathering the standing grain, as his arm harvests the ears, or it will be like one gleaning ears of grain in the valley of Rephaim."

As we've already seen, this is exactly what happened; in 722 B.C. Assyria did in fact attack Damascus and Israel, both of which were taken into exile! Now from the perspective of Judah, this might have solidified the conviction that it was good that they placed their trust in Assyria! Accordingly, Isaiah turned his focus in this chapter to showing the end of Assyria and any kingdom like them. Speaking of the fate of Assyria wrote this:

Isaiah 17:12-14, "Alas, the uproar of many peoples who roar like the roaring of the seas, and the rumbling of nations who rush on like the rumbling of mighty waters! The nations rumble on like the rumbling of many waters, but He [God] will rebuke them and they will flee far away, and be chased like chaff in the mountains before the wind, or like whirling dust before a gale. At evening time, behold, *there is* terror! Before morning they are no more. Such *will be* the portion of those who plunder us, and the lot of those who pillage us."

While the description here goes way beyond Assyria, clearly at this time this prophecy of doom largely involved them. And so, for any and every Judean who thought an alliance with Assyria was a good thing, Isaiah here says that this nation (AND EVERY NATION) will be defeated before God! Truly, any and all national dependence is folly! But that brings us to a more imminent temptation for the people of God in Judah at the time of the writing of this passage.

Isaiah 18:1-2a, "Alas, oh land of whirring wings which lies beyond the rivers of Cush [which is Egypt], which sends envoys by the sea, even in papyrus vessels on the surface of the waters..."

Let me give you the background to this verse. In 715 BC, turmoil struck NOT ONLY Judah (recall Ahaz died in that year) and the Moabites (recall Sargon II was threatening the nation), it ALSO struck Cush/Egypt. The pharaoh had died and an Ethiopian man named, Piankhi, seized control founding the twenty-fifth (Ethiopian) Dynasty. To protect Egypt from the threat of Assyria, Piankhi sent out a series of envoys to the nations east of Egypt. These envoys were charged with the creation of an anti-Assyrian conglomerate.

One of these envoys obviously arrived in Judah at the time of the writing of this passage. As such, Isaiah took it upon Himself to give the divine commentary on this Egyptian endeavor.

Isaiah 18:5-6, "For before the harvest, as soon as the bud blossoms and the flower becomes a ripening grape, then He [God] will cut off the sprigs with pruning knives and remove *and* cut away the spreading branches. They will be left together for mountain birds of prey, and for the beasts of the earth; and the birds of prey will spend the summer *feeding* on them, and all the beasts of the earth will spend harvest time on them."

Egypt too will not last! The coalition envisioned by Piankhi also would fail; Judah must not join! Clearly from any and every perspective, foreign national dependence will not protect Judah or any people of God at any time! As such, Judah must not pin its hope on foreign alliance. Truly, their only hope and trust was God! And lest they refuse, God used Israel's rebellion as an example of what Judah ought NOT to do!

Isaiah 17:9-10b, "In that day their strong cities will be like forsaken places in the forest, or like branches which they abandoned before the sons of Israel; and the land will be a desolation. [Truly, bad times were headed toward Israel. Why? Notice v. 10...] For you have forgotten the God of your salvation and have not remembered the rock of your refuge..."

How could Israel forsake such a source of protection and help as what they had in Christ? In fact, notice the contrast, Isaiah hoped Judah saw it! The idea behind, "rock" is that of permanence! How long will the Rocky Mountains remain? Until the end of the age! How long will God protect, care, and provide for His people? He will protect them for as long as the earth remains, AND BEYOND! And yet, what is it that God's people did in response?

Isaiah 17:10b-11, "Therefore you plant delightful plants and set them with vine slips of a strange *god* [IOW, they used the branch of a sacred, pagan tree to support the cutting]. In the day that you plant *it* you carefully fence *it* in, and in the morning you bring your seed to blossom; *but* the harvest will be a heap in a day of sickness and incurable pain."

There is debate as to the reference here, but many believe that behind this passage is the Tammuz Cult, a religious practice quite common at this time in the Near East. In fact we read about it in Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 8:14, "Then He brought me to the entrance of the gate of the Lord's house which *was* toward the north; and behold, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz."

Tammuz was a fertility cult in which plant cuttings were grown in a pot, force-bloomed, and then allowed to die. It symbolized the cycle of reproduction, birth, life, and then death, a very common theme behind all the fertility cults of the ancient world. And so at the time not only could one go to a high place and participate formally in a fertility cult but one could also have his own little altar to re-enact the worship of Tammuz.

This is exactly what God's people were doing in Israel! Their hope and trust were in their "vine slips of a strange god" by which they "carefully fenced it" with a view toward "bringing the seed to blossom." It was their belief that by reenacting the fertility cycle of Tammuz, the struggle of Israel (depicted by the dying plant) would give way to the peace and joy of a freshly potted vine!

I hope Judah is listening! The Northern Kingdom forsook the “rock of their salvation” for “vine slips of a strange god.” How could they be so foolish?!- that is what Isaiah hoped his generation would ask! In fact, if Israel’s folly wasn’t enough to bring Judah back to faith in Christ, consider what God does and would do with or without His people...

The Perseverance of Faith

Speaking of the judgment that God would send upon Israel on account of their national rebellion Isaiah wrote this:

Isaiah 17:6-8, “Yet gleanings will be left in it like the shaking of an olive tree, two *or* three olives on the topmost bough, four *or* five on the branches of a fruitful tree, declares the Lord, the God of Israel. [IOW, there would be a remnant! There always is!] In that day man will have regard for his Maker, and his eyes will look to the Holy One of Israel. And he will not have regard for the altars, the work of his hands, nor will he look to that which his fingers have made, even the Asherim and incense stands.”

What an incredible statement and rebuke for the people of God! What they had and yet had rejected, many a Gentile would someday flock to: the Lord, His goodness, and His grace!

Truly there would be a remnant amongst the people of God- men and women who at one point had given themselves to the sick gods of Canaan! Yet in time they would completely forsake “the Asherim and incense stands” and so return to the Lord of glory! In the end, faith would win out! There would be a remnant! The question is: would Judah be numbered among those who would persist in belief? Isaiah wanted the people of God in Judah to consider this fourth message on faith!

With that, Isaiah gave another review which followed the same pattern as Isaiah 17-18.

The Failure of Self-Dependence

Isaiah gives us a detailed description of the folly and failure of man.

Isaiah 22:1-2a, “The oracle concerning the valley of vision. What is the matter with you now that you have all gone up to the housetops? You who were full of noise, you boisterous town, you exultant city...”

This is in reference to Sargon II’s raid against the Judean city of Azekah in 711 BC.¹ Let me give you the background for this time in history. Most of the coastal cities of Palestine were under the control of Assyria (Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gaza). In 711 BC the Philistine city of Ashdod revolted against Assyria deposing the Assyrian governor placed there by Sargon II (Isaiah 20). Sargon II at once dispatched a force to subdue the rebels with the result that the city was severely punished.

Now during this military campaign, the Assyrian army for some reason turned their focus against Azekah, an isolated city in the heart of Judah! And yet, while initially this would have been quite alarming to those of Judah, nevertheless all fear and worry dissipated because the Assyrian forces suddenly and for seemingly no reason withdrew. In response, the people of Judah held a great celebration. Yet it wasn’t a

celebration of the Lord's deliverance, but a celebration of their *temporal* safety!

Isaiah 22:1b-2a, "What is the matter with you now, that you have all gone up to the housetops? [As the Assyrians left, the people climbed to their housetops to watch the receding army and cheer!] You who were full of noise, you boisterous town, you exultant city..."

Again, this is a reflection of their celebration. Yet this raises the question: what should God's people have done? To what did godliness call the nation during this time of national disaster?

Isaiah 22:12-13, "Therefore in that day the Lord God of hosts, called *you* to weeping, to wailing, to shaving the head, and to wearing sackcloth. Instead, there is gaiety and gladness, killing of cattle and slaughtering of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we may die.'"

Don't forget that there was a reason that Judah was feeling the threat of Assyria. As a theocratic nation they were in rebellion against God. As such, any and all threat to their national well-being was a sign that something wasn't right in their relationship with God. Yet sadly, the nation failed to read the "signs of the times."² Accordingly, in the midst of the people's celebration Isaiah gave a grave warning, the content of Isaiah 22:2-11.

Isaiah employed what is known as the Prophetic Perfect in which a past tense is used to describe a future reality (specifically in Isaiah 22:6-11). In other words, what Isaiah is about to describe is so certain, he speaks as if it already had occurred! And what is it that he is describing? The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (which occurred in 586 B.C.)!

Isaiah 22:2b-3, 5-7, "...Your slain were not slain with the sword, nor did they die in battle [this is a picture of destruction by a siege] All your rulers have fled together, and have been captured without the bow; all of you who were found were taken captive together, though they had fled far away... 5 For the Lord God of hosts has a day of panic, subjugation, and confusion in the valley of vision, a breaking down of walls and a crying to the mountain. And Elam took up the quiver with the chariots, infantry, and horsemen; and Kir uncovered the shield. Then your choicest valleys were full of chariots, and the horsemen took up fixed positions at the gate. And He removed the defense of Judah."

What an accurate description of Jerusalem in and around 586 BC! So get this: while the people were taken up with mindless rejoicing over a temporal victory (cf. Isaiah 22:12-14), Isaiah sees the city as it would be in 586 BC! And that is why Isaiah says this:

Isaiah 22:4, "Therefore I say, 'Turn your eyes away from me, let me weep bitterly, do not try to comfort me concerning the destruction of the daughter of my people.'"

In view of the coming destruction, Isaiah could not rejoice! With this we are brought to the central focus of this passage... Shebna the steward! To show the folly of man-trust, Isaiah describes the activity of this public servant during this time.

Isaiah 22:15, "Thus says the Lord God of hosts, 'Come, go to this steward, to Shebna, who is in charge of the royal household.'"

The word for “steward” [שָׂרָן (*sakan*)] referred to the “king’s confidant” or his “counselor.” That is what Shebna was. Accordingly, He was a very high ranking official in Judah, second only to the king (Isaiah 22:21)! A modern equivalent to this would be, “Vice President.” Now rather than fulfilling his job which would have included leading the people of God in national repentance on account of the victory God gave at this time in turning the Assyrians away from “Azekah,” Shebna was preoccupied with the work of making his own tomb!

Isaiah 22:16, “What right do you have here, and whom do you have here, that you have hewn a tomb for yourself here, you who hew a tomb on the height, you who carve a resting place for yourself in the rock?”

So what are your leaders doing right now? The nation is falling apart. The weak and helpless have been neglected, the worship of God has been compromised. Shebna is consumed NOT with any of these problems, BUT the tomb in which his body would rest upon his death!

This is reminiscent of the Pharaoh’s of Egypt who began construction on their tomb as soon as they ascended to the throne. So what would God do? Nothing less than depose Him as promised in Isaiah 22:17-19!

Isaiah is showing us the foolishness of placing our confidence in another man. No man — regardless of his appearance or genuine godliness— is a candidate for our trust! In fact, Isaiah is going to fast-forward the clock and demonstrate the foolish choice that would be made by the leaders of Judah prior to their destruction. After describing the awful future that awaited Judah, Isaiah turned to the reason for the destruction.

Isaiah 22:8b-11, “In that day you depended on the weapons of the house of the forest, and you saw that the breaches in the *wall* of the city of David were many; and you collected the waters of the lower pool. Then you counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you tore down houses to fortify the wall. And you made a reservoir between the two walls for the waters of the old pool. But you did not depend on Him who made it, nor did you take into consideration Him who planned it long ago.”

No doubt many in Judah laughed when they read of the people of God in Israel who trusted in a “vine cutting” to protect them! Yet that essentially is what Judah would do when they were threatened. Rather than a “vine cutting,” they placed their hope in “the wood of the forest!” So, just like their northern sister, at the time of trial Judah would abandon the “Rock of their salvation” for a piece of wood! And yet once again to their shame, God would build His Kingdom with or without the individual Judean, as pictured in Eliakim.

The Perseverance of Faith

Isaiah 22:20-23, “Then it will come about in that day, that I will summon My servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah [see, God didn’t need Shebna! He could and would bring about His will with any man, here named Eliakim. Notice what God would do...]. And I will clothe him with your tunic, and tie your sash securely about him; I will entrust him with your authority, and he will become a father to the

inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open. And I will drive him *like* a peg in a firm place, and he will become a throne of glory to his father's house."

Though Judah was a nation falling into apostasy and disbelief, nevertheless God would build His Kingdom! Truly, there always would be a remnant that would by all means enjoy the covenant blessings of faith!

This brings us to a very important question: "What are the covenant blessings of faith?" Notice the final passage Isaiah gave in this section revolving around the theme of faith.

The Vindication of Faith

We do not have time to examine Isaiah 26:1-21. However, please note the following.

Isaiah 26:1-4, "In that day [speaking of the Messianic Kingdom and ultimately when it comes to this earth in its fullness] this song will be sung in the land of Judah: 'We have a strong city; He sets up walls and ramparts for security. Open the gates, that the righteous nation may enter, the one that remains faithful. The steadfast of mind Thou wilt keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in Thee. Trust in the Lord forever, for in God the Lord, *we have* an everlasting Rock.'"

Notice in this section the cluster of "righteousness, faith, peace, steadfastness, and salvation." These are the benefits which flow from salvation:

- Living in reliance upon God.
- Placing ones hope and confidence in Christ.
- "Entrusting your soul to a faithful Creator in doing what is right." (1 Peter 4:19)

What does this mean? It means that having had our faith instructed by the word of God, we do that to which we have been called trusting God to make good on His promises.

Let me ask you: ultimately, whose job is it to protect you? Provide for your needs? Bear you up? Truly having done everything to which we have been called to stand, we look to God to bring to pass that which He has promised! It is in this spirit that Paul wrote this word:

Philippians 4:6-7, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

It is this peace, comfort, and confidence which are the benefits/rewards of faith! It was this that Israel and Judah forfeited when they took matters into their own hands as they navigated the difficult waters of war, famine, compromise, and false religion. And it is this cluster of fruit that will characterize you if you would only believe/trust! How is this accomplished? Is there anything we can do to encourage our faith?

The Path of Faith

Isaiah 26:9, “At night my soul longs for Thee, indeed, my spirit within me seeks Thee diligently; for when the earth experiences Thy judgments the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.”

To understand what Isaiah is saying, we begin with the last phrase, “...for when the earth experiences Thy judgments the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.”

When Isaiah wrote this it was a tumultuous time to be alive. War, famine, trial, difficulty, and death were everywhere. These were “the judgments” that God was dispensing to His apostate people and to the wicked nations surrounding Judah. And what was the intended effect? That the world would “learn righteousness”- right-wiseness or right-living before God!³ This is incredible, family of God. This passage tells us how we ought to respond to national and/or personal crises. What ought we to do? What constitutes the “righteousness”/right-living referenced here? Isaiah states it in the first half of the verse.

Isaiah 26:9, “At night my soul longs for Thee, indeed, my spirit within me seeks Thee diligently...”

This is the “righteousness”/right-living to which God calls all people; this is the “righteousness” that ought to be learned on account of bitter providence, longing for God, seeking Him diligently. This is the path of faith. Archibald Brown wrote this:

Christianity is all centered in a person! Conversion is not a mere change of human opinion; it is the devotion of the heart to a person. A converted man is not a man who just changes his views concerning certain facts, or theories, or doctrines, but he is a man whose heart has become devoted to a living Christ. All your religion, if it is worth anything will be centered in a living personal Jesus. Your doctrines will all come from Him; your motives will be found in Him; your joys will be found in Him; your acceptance will be found in Him; your completeness will be found in Him! (Brown, 2012, p. preface)

This truly is what we are after in and through all of life. We must be about loving, knowing, and serving Christ. This is the object of our faith and so the embodiment of what it means to “live by faith.” So as I live in this world, I keep the main thing the main thing. I must not allow myself to get side-tracked with the cares and worries of life (as did Martha). Rather, I must remain focused in and through it all about the business of life: walking with Christ. And with that we are brought to faith’s commission.

Faith’s Commission

Isaiah 26:20-21, “Come, my people, enter into your rooms, and close your doors behind you; hide for a little while, until indignation runs its course. For behold, the Lord is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; and the earth will reveal her bloodshed, and will no longer cover her slain.”

At first glance it appears that Isaiah is encouraging God’s people essentially to hide their head in the sand. Yet that is not what he is saying. The Universe of Discourse has been a discussion of faith, reliance, and seeking God diligently in and through all things. With this context in mind, we understand what Isaiah

here is saying...

Isaiah 2:20-21, “Come, my people, enter into your rooms [of faith/communion/fellowship with God], and close your doors behind you [In other words, don’t allow yourself to be distracted or dissuaded from reliance upon Christ]; hide for a little while, until indignation runs its course. [of course we know that this ‘little while’ references the duration of our lives in this state of sin and misery!] For behold, the Lord is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity [this ultimately references the Last Judgment]; and the earth will reveal her bloodshed, and will no longer cover her slain [obviously referring to the last time when all our sins will be uncovered].”

What is the call of faith that rests on our lives? Whatever we do, we must not let any person, force, or power dissuade us or distract us from a life of fellowship/communion/dependence upon God! This was Isaiah’s call to His generation. And this remains the call of God upon all believers today.

End Notes

¹ Eliakim became steward over the royal house in and around 701 BC (2 Kings 18:37; Isaiah 36:3). Thus, this text obviously precedes that date, and therefore only makes sense in reference to Sargon’s raid in 711 BC.

² They could predict the weather, but they failed to see the significance of their latest problem (cf. Matthew 16:2-3).

³ Because the non-Christian doesn’t do this, they completely miss the working of God in their lives. Notice Is. 26:10-11, “Though the wicked is shown favor [this is speaking about the pleasant pastures/sweet providences that God at times gives to mankind], he does not learn righteousness; he deals unjustly in the land of uprightness, and does not perceive the majesty of the Lord. [O.K. if blessing won’t open the eyes of the blind, how about bitter providence?] O Lord, Thy hand is lifted up [this is a Hebraism for trial and difficulty] yet they do not see it. They see Thy zeal for the people and are put to shame; indeed, fire will devour Thine enemies.”

Sources Cited

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About the Preacher

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