

The Lord of the Nations

“In love a throne will be established; in faithfulness a man will sit on it—one from the house of David—one who in judging seeks justice and speeds the cause of righteousness.” Isaiah 16:5

In the section that follows (13-37), Isaiah presents an eschatological symphony that tells the real story of human depravity and presents the true hope of everlasting life. The Spirit-inspired prophet blended together the dark and foreboding strains of God’s judgment with the brilliant illumination of God’s salvation. He had an amazing ability to reveal the present and future realities of judgment and salvation in dynamic tension so that God’s people, then and now, would be compelled to live each day in the light of the absolute finality of the end. He moved freely from the pending judgments on Judah’s immediate horizon to the future judgment of the whole earth. He rejoiced in the immediate experience of God’s deliverance and looked forward to God’s ultimate salvation, when “everlasting joy will crown [our] heads” and when “gladness and joy will overtake [us], and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (35:10).

Doomsday Message

The metaphor of a symphony helps to illustrate the repetition of dynamic themes that come in and out of Isaiah’s prophecy. Isaiah begins by surveying the surrounding nations: Babylon to the north (13:1-14:27), Philistia to the west (14:28-32), Moab to the east (15:1-16:13) and Egypt to the south (18:1-20:6). And in between Moab and Egypt, Isaiah discusses the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim), and her capital city of Damascus (17:1-14).

Isaiah’s doomsday message to the nations was designed to attack sinful human pride in its many forms, including ethnic and nationalistic superiority, material and military arrogance, and idolatrous religious pride. It is significant that Babylon topped Isaiah’s hit list, because at the time Babylon was only an emerging superpower and Assyria was Israel’s immediate threat. But it was Babylon that would eventually conquer Judah and force the Jews into exile. Ever since the Tower of Babel (Gen 11) Babylon has symbolized the solidarity of

worldly principalities and powers. Isaiah called Babylon “the jewel of kingdoms,” and his description of the boastful Babylonian spirit recalls the people of Shinar:

“You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’ But you are brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit” (14:13-15; see 13:19).

Isaiah pictured Babylon as an emerging superpower that embodied the power of the human spirit turned against the Lord God. Some eight hundred years after Isaiah, the Apostle John used Babylon to symbolize not only the Roman Empire, but every secular and spiritual power that set itself up against the Kingdom of God. Down through the ages God has pronounced judgment against the spirit of Babylon. “Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come! (Rev 18:10).

Isaiah visualized the judgment of God in graphic detail against Assyrian oppression, Philistine collaboration and Moabite pride. The prophet predicted Ephraim’s ruin because of her idolatry and Egypt’s downfall because of her aggression. He then ended this first series by abruptly moving from final judgment and future salvation to the immediate events of 711 BC. In that year, Sargon II, King of Assyria (2 Ki 18:17) reduced Egypt to an Assyrian province. For three years Isaiah had dramatically predicted Egypt’s captivity by going around stripped of his usual sackcloth outer garment and walking barefoot in order to shame those who sought security in a political alliance with Egypt (20:1-6).

In the second and shorter movement, Isaiah begins again with Babylon, “the Desert by the Sea,” to declare that it is all over for this emerging world power. “Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!” (21:9). He then preceded to issue a devastating message to Edom to the south (21:11-12), Arabia to the east (21:13-17), and Tyre to the west (23:18). Once again he discusses the people of God. He speaks of the Valley of Decision, which is Jerusalem, the City of David, whose residents appear to be busy preparing to withstand a siege and trying to keep their spirits up (22:1-25). Where there should have been repentance, there was revelry, and instead of faithfulness there was fatalism. “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die!” (22:13), was the slogan of the day. Jerusalem’s leaders looked strong and secure, but their days were numbered and their egotistical leadership unreliable.

Isaiah concludes with a dramatic prophecy of the economic crash of Tyre, “the marketplace of the nations,” sending the world’s economy into a free fall (23:3) and predicting that Tyre’s demise would surprise everyone and cause some to ask, “Who planned this against Tyre, the bestower of crowns, whose merchants are princes, whose traders are renowned in the earth?” The prophet had a ready answer, “The Lord Almighty planned it, to bring low the pride of all glory and to humble all who are renowned on the earth” (23:8-9). Isaiah prophesied that Tyre would be out of business for seventy years before returning to her old ways and practicing her trade with all the foxy ways and seduction of a prostitute. Isaiah’s picture of Tyre’s rebound does not offer a flattering picture of capitalism, “She’ll go back to her old whoring trade, selling herself to the highest bidder, doing anything with anyone—promiscuous with all the kingdoms of earth— for a fee” (23:17, *The Message*). But Isaiah offers a surprising twist at the end of his prophesy on Tyre that states unequivocally that God will turn that which is evil into good. “Yet her profit and her earnings will be set apart for the Lord; they will not be stored up or hoarded. Her profits will go to those who live before the Lord, for abundant food and fine clothes” (23:18). In spite of the fact that the mantra of capitalism is the survival of the fittest in a dog-eat-dog-world, God will achieve his purposes, even with the wealth of nations.

Isaiah’s eschatological symphony resounds with powerful themes. The evil power and arrogant pride of the nations is exposed and condemned by the Sovereign Lord of the Nations, whose plan and purpose for the nations is determined and cannot be thwarted (14:26-27). Israel’s vulnerability among the nations is pictured, but her centrality in God’s sovereign plan is assured (14:1-2). She is warned not to place her confidence in false alliances. Her dependence must be exclusively on the Lord God. Yet it is hard for Israel to resist this temptation because she is prone to forget that the Lord God is her Savior (17:10). She prefers to place her trust in her own ingenious defenses (22:8-11), unflappable confidence (22:13) and proud leaders (22:15-25).

The question for the church is whether or not Isaiah’s description of the nations in his day fits a description of the nations in our day. Should we substitute the names of today’s superpowers for the political powers of eighth century BC? I believe we should. There is a timeliness about Isaiah’s prophecy that ought to bear on our day. We are not just discussing ancient history when we study Isaiah’s prophecies, but modern history as well. In place of Babylon we can read America or China, and instead of Tyre we can think Japan or Brazil. The apostle John saw ancient

Babylon as the prototype for the first century Roman Empire and he used the language of Isaiah to prophecy against Rome. This also means that Isaiah's message to Israel and Judah has special relevance for today's representation of the people of God, the church. Israel's vulnerability among the nations and her centrality in God's redemptive plan is true today for the Body of Christ, the church.

Throughout Isaiah's prophecy, he prepares us for the finality of God's judgment and the ultimate victory of God's Kingdom. Isaiah's initial oracle against Babylon is interrupted by a surprising declaration of hope for "the house of Jacob" that blesses the nations and turns the tables upside down (14:1-2). Instead of servitude based on bondage, which had been the plight of Israel, there will be service based on grace, for the good of all nations. Israel will rule over their oppressors, not for their harm, but for their good (see Motyer, p.142). Similar flashes of hope shine through in Isaiah's strident litany against the nations, lest we forget that God will make good on his promise of Salvation. At no point is Isaiah far from reminding God's people that the Lord is worthy of all trust and confidence (14:32; 16:5; 17:7-8).

A Banner for the Nations

One of the most important themes in this section and throughout the Gospel according to Isaiah is God's blessing to the nations and the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). The remnant of exiles scattered throughout the nations will be called home. The Lord God "will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth" (11:12). This new Exodus however will not be limited to ethnic Jews, but include all those who are willing to live under the banner of the Lord. "In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious" (11:10).

Egypt is a prime example of this Gospel inclusion. Isaiah's prophecy of judgment against Egypt made it emphatically clear that Egypt was not to be trusted and that Israel should under no circumstances ally herself with Egypt. But Isaiah had no sooner finished prophesying Egypt's dramatic demise, than he announced Egypt's conversion to Yahweh. Isaiah believed that a new day was coming when the Lord Almighty would be honored by Egyptians. "So the Lord will make himself known

to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the Lord.” And not only Egyptians, but the dreaded Assyrians, too. “In that day,” declared Isaiah, “there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance’ (19:19-25). Of all the pronouncements Isaiah was inspired to make this may have been the most radical. Assyria was Israel’s number one enemy and to prophesy that the day was coming when Assyrians would worship Yahweh was not only unthinkable, but must have been terribly infuriating for most Israelites.

Isaiah’s vision contradicted the ethnic exclusivity, religious pride and political nationalism that proudly inspired not only the Jews, but the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Philistines, and every nation. His vision of future salvation was boldly inclusive of all the nations, but it was based exclusively on God’s redemptive provision. Isaiah looked forward to the day when people from every nation would worship Yahweh in spirit and in truth (see 27:12-13).

Tale of Two Cities

Isaiah’s third movement begins by presenting the final destiny of the world through the tale of two cities (24-27), followed by six “woes” directed against those who oppose God’s will (28-33), and climaxed by a final description of judgment and salvation (34-35). The prophet is hopeful that the people of God will put their trust in the Lord God if they have a true vision of the end of evil and the future of God’s glory. Destruction and deliverance, judgment and salvation are presented in a dynamic, spiraling intensity, intended to convince God’s people of the absolute sovereignty of God. Pictures of utter desolation are juxtaposed with a series of dramatic scenes that portray the fellowship, celebration and security of God’s salvation (24:14-16; 25:6-8; 26:1-4; 27:2-6; 28:16; 29:22-24; 30:19-30; 32:1-5,15-20; 33:20-24; 35:1-10).

Isaiah offers us a powerful vision of what it means to pray, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). The fortified and lofty city of man will be laid low and ruined. All of its inhabitants, without exception, from the high to lowly, will be scattered (24:2). The party is over, the wine is gone, the music dies, and “the ruined city lies desolate; the entrance to every

house is barred” (24:10). But in spite of the fact that “all gaiety is banished from the earth,” Isaiah hears shouts of joy and the sound of singing acclaiming the Lord’s majesty. “From the ends of the earth we hear singing: ‘Glory to the Righteous One’” (24:16). The radical disparity between the sounds of groaning and the sounds of glory is too much for Isaiah. Overcome by a message of catastrophic final judgment, he cries out, “I waste away, I waste away! Woe to me!” (24:16).

“In that day,” Isaiah prophesies, “the Lord will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below (24:21). “...For the Lord Almighty will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before its elders, gloriously” (24:23). Isaiah is filled with praise for God’s perfect faithfulness and for his power to reduce the city of man to a heap of rubble (25:1-2). He describes the human impact of God’s faithfulness: “You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat...” (25:4). He envisions a glorious banquet, “a feast of rich food for all peoples,” where “the Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces” (25:6-8). The tension between destruction and deliverance continues as Isaiah contrasts the testimony of God’s people, who gratefully declare, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation,” with the pride of Moab that will be trampled under foot and their fortified walls pulverized (25:10-12).

Isaiah’s song of praise continues by expressing tremendous confidence in the Lord, the Rock of Ages, “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal” (26:3-4). The prophet has learned by personal experience that obedience to the commands of God is the only way to go and that the way of righteousness leads to personal communion with the Lord. “My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you” (26:9). He acknowledges that the people of God have not responded well to the grace they have been shown, but a new day is coming when discipline will lead to devotion. “O Lord, our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but your name alone do we honor” (26:13).

In contrast to Isaiah’s opening vineyard prophesy (5:1-7) a new day has dawned and the future looks bright. “In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit” (27:6). The prospect of discipline and exile remains in order for Jacob’s guilt to be atoned for and for the idols and

pagan altars to be crushed. Yet even with that bright hope, Isaiah cannot shake the vision of the fortified city of man that lies desolate, abandoned, and ruined because the people have no understanding. But he knows that the vision of utter desolation is not the last word. The day of judgment will also be a day of deliverance. “In that day a great trumpet will sound. Those who were perishing in Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain in Jerusalem” (27:13). Isaiah’s prophesy points forward to the inclusiveness of the Gospel of Christ. This is the mystery that the apostle Paul spoke of when he said that the Gentiles “are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:6). Isaiah’s prophesy of a great trumpet sound signaling the end, corresponds to Jesus’ prophesy of “a loud trumpet call” when the Son of Man “will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (Mt 24:31; see Zech 9:14; 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thes 4:16).

Isaiah’s eschatological symphony is brought to a conclusion in chapters 34-35. Once again final judgment in all of its horror, and final salvation in all of its glory, are contrasted in order to compel people to turn to the Lord. But before this climax occurs, Isaiah uses a series of six woes to expose Israel’s woeful disregard for God’s word, her spiritual apathy, her moral indifference, and her reliance upon herself.

Six “Woes” from the Lord of History

The prophet moves from his all-encompassing vision of the end of history, to the immediate practical question of political alliances (28-37). He continues to interject his vision of what life will be like when “a king will reign in righteousness” (32:1) and when “the fruit of righteousness will be peace” and “the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever” (32:17). But he is focused on Israel’s persistent resistance to trust in the Lord in spite of the Sovereign Lord’s declaration, “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trust will never be dismayed” (28:16).

Each “woe” summons the professing people of God to give an account for their obstinate behavior. The first “woe” is directed against Ephraim (Israel) who is far too self-indulgent and proud to be responsive to the will of God. The fast fading beauty of her landscape is nothing compared to the Lord Almighty’s crown of

beauty. Ephraim is proud of its wine, but the fruit of the Lord's glory is justice and righteousness. Isaiah presents a sickening picture of Israel's leaders. They are nothing but drunken bums, but they're the very ones who mock Isaiah's prophecy and scoff that it is simplistic and childish. They ridicule basic truth with a little ditty: "Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there" (28:10). When the Lord God called Isaiah he warned that he was being sent to a people who would "be ever hearing, but never understanding" and that the effect of Isaiah's message would be to harden people's hearts to the truth (6:9f). Instead of being open to God's saving message, which would have given them rest (28:12), they will have to receive God's message of judgment from "foreign lips and strange tongues" (28:11). Having refused to receive Isaiah's message, they would be forced to accept Assyria's message. Instead of finding refuge in the truth they would look for safety in a lie; instead of trusting in Yahweh's covenant, they would make a "covenant with death" (28:15). They were about to undergo Yahweh's "strange work" of judgment (28:21), which was all part of God's "farming" strategy that was designed to bring about a harvest of righteousness (28:23-29). Since Ephraim's pride and joy was in their well trimmed vineyards, she should appreciate the Lord's desire to do with his people what any good farmer does with his crop. A similar theme is picked up and developed by Jesus when he said, "I am the vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that bears fruit he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful" (Jn 15:1-2). For Isaiah, "All this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom" (28:29).

The second "woe" is against "Ariel" a pseudonym for Jerusalem which means "altar hearth" and directs attention to Judah's religious life. Far from religion being her strength, it was a sign of her growing weakness. Isaiah was confident that Jerusalem's enemies, "the hordes of all the nations that fight against Mount Zion" would be destroyed (29:5-8), but Judah's weakness would remain and she would stagger as if she were drunk. To the religious in Isaiah's day, his message was nothing but words on a scroll that people easily ignored with lame excuses (29:11-12). With an air of urbane sophistication and religious pride they continued to go through the motions without caring to know God.

"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men. Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom

of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish” (29:13-14).

Years later, the apostle Paul used this prophecy to explain the world’s assessment of the message of the cross as foolishness. Whether it was religious Jews or pagan Gentiles, “the wisdom of the wise” ran counter to the truth of God in Christ (1 Cor 1:18-25).

The third “woe” is directed against those “who go to great depths to hide their plans from the Lord, who do their work in darkness and think, ‘Who sees us? Who will know?’” (29:15). The prophet illustrates their arrogance and stupidity by likening them to a clay pot that denies the existence of the potter. “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘He did not make me’?” (29:16).

Nevertheless, “in a very short time,” which must refer to God’s perspective of history rather than ours (29:17, see 2 Pet 3:8), everything will be different. The deaf will hear and the blind will see. “No longer will Jacob be ashamed; no longer will their faces grow pale...They will keep my name holy; they will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob, and will stand in awe of the God of Israel. Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding; those who complain will accept instruction” (29:22-24).

The fourth “woe” is directed to the “obstinate children” who insist on forming an alliance with Egypt. Isaiah pictures Judah’s envoys carrying treasures across the desert in order to win Egyptian favor, but the verdict is already in, “Pharaoh’s protection will be to your shame.” God’s decision is this: “These are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the Lord’s instruction” (30:1-7). Once again the problem is their rejection of God’s revelation. It is hard to imagine that the people actually said to the prophets in so many words, “Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!” But isn’t the modern church guilty of its own wilful obstinacy? Our silence on self-indulgent materialism, pre-marital sex, same-gender sex, and consumer-oriented religion all point in a similar direction. Have we not been guilty of using grace to disqualify Christ’s command to obey? We have to ask, are we any more willing to be confronted by the Holy One than ancient Judah was?

In spite of Judah’s record, Isaiah continues to hold out hope. He reminds the people, “Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you

compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!” (30:18). He is by no means all doom and gloom. He continues to point forward to that new day coming when the people of Zion “will weep no more” and they will hear God’s voice of approval, saying, “This is the way; walk in it” (30:19-21). And on the immediate horizon, Isaiah continues to assure them that the Lord will shatter Assyria with his scepter and burn it up with his breath (30:31-33).

The fifth “woe” is also directed against those “who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel” (31:1). In language reminiscent of Israel’s exodus from Egyptian bondage, Isaiah says, “the Lord Almighty will shield Jerusalem; he will shield it and deliver it, he will ‘pass over’ it and will rescue it” (31:5; see Ex 12:13,23,27). Isaiah is confident that the day is coming when the king will reign in righteousness and “the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed, and the ears of those who hear will listen” (32:3; see Jer 31:33). But until then, fools are in power and women are complacent (32:6-14). Isaiah must have delighted in abrupt turning points, one moment describing the pending doom facing Judah and then breaking off in mid-sentence and shifting to the ultimate future awaiting God’s people, when “the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field”...[When] “the fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever” (32:17).

The sixth and final “woe” is reserved for the enemy who is described as a destroyer, traitor, and betrayer. Sennacherib king of Assyria qualified for this description. He was the one who exacted from Hezekiah king of Judah 11 tons of silver and 1 ton of gold to ward off an invasion. But no sooner had Hezekiah stripped the temple of its gold and silver to pay the ransom than Sennacherib attacked and captured Judah’s fortified cities and laid siege to Jerusalem (2 Ki 18:13-17; Isa 36:1f). It must have been an awful realization for Hezekiah who had paid dearly to appease the king of Assyria, that all his efforts had failed. Isaiah captured the spirit of the times when he wrote, “Look, their brave men cry aloud in the streets; the envoys of peace weep bitterly. The highways are deserted, no travelers are on the roads. The treaty is broken, its witnesses are despised, no one is respected” (33:7-8). Yet again, as he had done so many times before, Isaiah holds out hope for a new day when Israel will be at peace and free of any foreign dependencies: “Look upon Zion, the city of our festivals; your eyes will see Jerusalem, a peaceful abode, a tent that will not be moved; its stakes will never be

pulled up, nor any of its ropes broken. There the Lord will be our Mighty One...For the Lord is our judge; the Lord is our lawgiver; the Lord is our king, it is he who will save us” (33:20-22).

Before describing Assyria’s siege of Jerusalem, and Hezekiah’s prayer to the Lord and his response to Sennacherib’s ultimatum, Isaiah carefully presented a renewed vision of the end. The immediate crisis was placed in the context of final judgment and ultimate salvation. The prophet insisted that “today” must be lived in the light of “tomorrow’s” hope. The apostle John’s Revelation comes to mind when reading Isaiah’s description of judgment:

“Come near, you nations, and listen; pay attention, you peoples!
Let the earth hear, and all that is in it, the world, and all that comes out of it! The Lord is angry with all nations; his wrath is upon their armies. He will totally destroy them, he will give them over to slaughter. Their slain will be thrown out, their dead bodies will send up a stench; the mountains will be soaked with their blood. All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree” (34:1-4).

Isaiah used Edom to symbolize the final hostile power that will be utterly destroyed by the Lord on the day of vengeance. He used a collage of horrendous images of devastation to describe this judgment. The land is soaked in blood, littered with carcasses, burning with blazing pitch, and overrun with thorns. But this picture of desolation is eclipsed by an all encompassing description of salvation. It is a picture of life as God intended it to be, filled with ecological beauty, relational wholeness, emotional support, physical health, moral purity, and complete security. Running through the land is a highway called the Way of Holiness, reserved for all those who are redeemed and ransomed by the Lord, who “enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (35:8-10). For Isaiah it was absolutely essential to keep this perspective in mind in order to deal with life’s daily challenges!

Hezekiah’s Defining Moment

Isaiah presents the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem and Sennacherib’s blasphemous

threat as a practical case study in how the truth of God's sovereign judgment and salvation proves itself in the immediate crisis facing Israel. Backed by a large Assyrian army, Sennacherib's field commander confronted Hezekiah's delegation at the aqueduct of the Upper Pool. It was the same place where Isaiah had confronted King Ahaz some thirty years earlier (7:3). Within the hearing of those on the wall, the Assyrian field commander gave a speech in Hebrew calculated to intimidate and demoralize. He mocked their confidence in mounting a military defense and ridiculed their reliance on Egypt. He even tried to use Hezekiah's spiritual reforms to undermine Jerusalem's confidence in the Lord God, implying that Hezekiah had weakened Israel's religious life by destroying the pagan high places. He even claimed that the Lord himself had told him to march against Judah and destroy it (36:10)! His final argument, which was proclaimed loud enough for the people on the city wall to hear, went to the heart of Isaiah's message and the exclusive truth claim of Yahweh. Saving his strongest point for last, he shouted, "Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, 'The Lord will deliver us.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria?" (36:18). Unwittingly, he focused on the number one truth question. Is Israel's God the Lord of the Nations or a tribal deity? Unlike today, at least the Assyrian field commander framed the political and military crisis theologically. The people of Judah could not have asked for a sharper challenge to their faith in Yahweh.

When Hezekiah heard this he immediately sent word to Isaiah, saying, "...It may be that the Lord your God will hear the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the Lord your God has heard. Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives" (37:4). It was a truly humble response that gave the entire matter up to the Lord and asked the prophet to pray. Isaiah immediately sent word back to Hezekiah, saying, "This is what the Lord says: 'Do not be afraid of what you have heard—those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me.'" Furthermore, Isaiah disclosed to Hezekiah the strategy God would use to destroy Sennacherib. "Listen! I am going to put a spirit in him so that when he hears a certain report, he will return to his own country, and there I will have him cut down with the sword" (37:5-7).

Under pressure to act quickly the king of Assyria renewed his threat in writing. Isaiah tells us that Hezekiah received the letter and acted deliberately. He went "up to the temple of the Lord and spread it out before the Lord." He prayed,

“O Lord Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see; listen to all the words of Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God.

“It is true, O Lord, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. Now, O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God.”

Without a doubt this was Hezekiah’s finest hour. He rose to the challenge and met the crisis with prayer, not panic. He put everything on the line and trusted in the Lord. He refused to surrender up to the principalities and powers, not only his people, but his faith in Yahweh, the Lord of the nations and the God of Creation. It must have thrilled Isaiah to proclaim the word of the Lord to Judah’s faithful king. His devastating rebuke against Assyria must have bolstered Hezekiah’s confidence. Isaiah answered Sennacherib’s blasphemous insults with mocking scorn and announced that Judah would have the victory without shooting an arrow in self-defense. “Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed?” Isaiah asked. “Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes in pride?” His answer is emphatic, “Against the Holy One of Israel!” (37:23). Assyria had mocked the very One who had used them as a disposable instrument of his judgment and now he would put a hook in their nose and lead them back to Nineveh (37:29; see 10:5-15). As always Yahweh had the last word: “I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!” (37:35). And defend it he did. “...The angel of the Lord went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp” (37:36). Isaiah finished the account by reporting that one day, while Sennacherib was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, he was murdered by two of his sons (37:38). Hezekiah’s defining moment stood as a powerful testimony that the Lord was sovereign over the nations and that the Lord would honor those who honored him.

In That Day

The meaning of Israel’s phrase *in that day* extends from the revelation of the tender shoot to the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. Isaiah looked

forward to the day when the Root of Jesse “will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious” (11:10). For us, that day of expectation has already arrived in the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Man of the Spirit. We wait now for that day’s final culmination in a new heaven and a new earth. In the meantime, we have a story to tell to the nations that will turn their hearts to the Lord. Isaiah’s prophecy is in keeping with our Lord’s great commission:

“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 28:18-20).

This is confirmed in Isaiah’s song of praise (12:1-6). Isaiah’s psalm begins by expressing his personal gratitude for salvation, “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation” (12:2). This is the salvation that only God can provide; the salvation that quenches not only the prophet’s spiritual thirst, but ours as well. Isaiah turns from his gratitude to our joy by using an image that immediately causes us to think of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4), “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (12:3). Isaiah moves from the personal to the global by expanding the circle of salvation to encompass the nations. “In that day you will say: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world” (12:4-5).

My first real awareness of this biblical text came when I was in Mongolia on a mission trip. A Swedish missionary read this Isaiah text in a worship service. She had learned that morning that her mother had died in Sweden. She said that she had never felt further away from home than she did that morning. But she was reminded of the prophet’s challenge to make the Gospel message known among the nations. She finished reading this song of praise and then she led the children in their special worship time. That morning she showed us all how to lift up the banner of the Lord.

We see the fulfillment of Isaiah’s doxology in Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well. The old walls of racial exclusivity and religious pride are

pulled down for the sake of the inclusiveness of the Gospel of Christ. Jesus' statement, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth," corresponds to Isaiah's "in that day" prophecy. And his praise line, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (12:3), makes us think of Jesus's declaration, "Indeed, the water I give [her] will become in [her] a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14). In a beautiful and moving way the universal reach of the Gospel was illustrated in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Sychar.

Whatever old banners may have rallied the nations, the banner of the Lord rises above them all. Gone are the patriot banners, the company logos, the school mascots, the famous labels and the personal symbols of success. The flags of the old order have been lowered and the banner of the Lord has been raised up. The symbolism of the banner of the Lord has a history that dates back to Moses. In the battle of the Amalekites, the Israelites proved victorious because Moses lifted up the staff of God in his hands. Moses sat on a stone and Aaron and Hur stood on either side lifting up his hands. After the victory, Moses built an altar and called it *The Lord is my Banner*. He said, "For hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord" (Ex 17:15). The image of Moses with outstretched arms, together with an altar entitled *The Lord is my Banner*, is a reminder of a far greater event. The reason the Lord is lifted up as a banner for the nations is because Jesus, the Man of the Spirit, the tender shoot and the Root of Jesse, was lifted up on the Cross. We cannot earn our salvation, even the best of our works will never merit the mercy of God, much less compare to the glory of God. It is absolutely pitiful to think that we could ever rally around our own banner. We cannot save ourselves, we declare with Isaiah, "God is my salvation" (12:2). The Lord is our banner, high and lifted up, because he who is now exalted in majesty was first lifted up on the Cross and raised from the dead.

