

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 5

ISAIAH 49:1–53:12

THE BACKGROUND

Isaiah 40–66 are prophecies the Lord inspired Isaiah to deliver in the eighth century B.C. that look ahead to the Babylonian exile and beyond. Readers familiar with the typical Explore-the-Bible approach to Bible-book study will observe right away that chapters 49–53 of Isaiah are being presented out of sequence. The Explore the Bible team chose to place the study of these chapters immediately prior to the Easter lesson on Jesus' resurrection from Matthew 28 because Isaiah 53 is a vivid prophecy of Jesus' suffering and death. Chapters 40–48 of Isaiah will be studied the Sunday after Easter.

The Lord initially chose Israel and later a remnant of Israel to be His servant not only to bring the nation back to Him but also to carry the good news of salvation to all peoples (Isa. 49:3-6). Following their future exile, the Lord would gather His people from the nations where they had been scattered, and give them renewed life and security. Though the people would feel abandoned after the Lord judged them for their sins, He declared He had not forsaken His people. He would return them to their land and multiply them. The Lord's restoration of His people would witness to His lordship (Isa. 49:1-26).

The Lord reminded His people that He had power to deliver them. Their judgment would result from their sins, not from His inability to save them (50:1-3). Isaiah 50:4 begins another prophecy about the Servant that was fulfilled in Christ. Passages that refer to the Servant's suffering are in past tense (see 50:5-6) because in the mind of God they already are accomplished (see 1 Pet. 1:17-21). In contrast to the people of Israel, the Lord's Servant trusted and obeyed the Lord. He willingly suffered abuse and humiliation to accomplish the Lord's work (Isa. 50:5-9). Verses 10-11 are a pronouncement of judgment on those who fail to trust in the Lord.

Beginning in chapter 51, the Lord called His people to wake up and trust Him as Abraham and Sarah had done. As the Lord had worked through His people in the past, He would do so again. A messenger would bring good news that would make the watchmen on the walls shout for joy. As the Lord led His people out of Egypt and into Canaan in the past, so He would lead the future exiles back home (51:1–52:12).

In Isaiah 52:13–53:12 the prophecy about the Lord's Servant, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, reaches a pinnacle. The Servant would experience horrible rejection and suffering that would leave Him looking less than human. Many would think He was suffering for His own sins when in reality He willingly and vicariously bore the sins and punishment of humanity to make it possible for sinners to be in right relationship with God. The Lord would bless His Servant and through Him provide the salvation that is offered freely to all who accept Christ as Lord and Savior (52:13–53:12). As we read Isaiah 52:13–53:12, we can't help but clearly see the description of the Servant and His suffering fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

1. LISTEN UP! (ISA. 49:1-26)

The first 39 chapters of the Book of Isaiah record the prophet's words directed to his own generation. He urged them to repent and trust in the Lord. If the people refused, they would experience the Lord's judgment for their sins. Chapters 40–66 present the Lord's prophetic word through Isaiah to those who would be exiled in Babylonia after the fall of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 587 B.C. In these latter chapters the Lord comforted His people who would experience loss and suffering as judgment for their sins. Through His eighth-century B.C. prophet, the Lord predicted the future fall of Babylon, the restoration of Israel to its land through the Persian King Cyrus, and the One to come who would bring salvation.

These prophecies of restoration and salvation were delivered to encourage the Lord's suffering people by reminding them of His power, steadfast love, and gracious plans for them. These messages also were intended to motivate the people to repent and follow the Lord. These prophetic words that concerned not only the Lord's people in the seventh century B.C. but also looked ahead to the fall of the nation, their restoration, and the coming of the Messiah continue to challenge believers in every generation.

Isaiah wrote four Servant Songs about the Lord's Servant who would come and bring salvation to Israel and the world. Isaiah 49:1-6 comprises the second of the Servant Songs with the first being found in Isaiah 42:1-4 and the final two in Isaiah 50:4-9 and 52:13–53:12 respectively. These prophecies ultimately were fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The part of the Background Passage discussed in this section of the Commentary begins with the second Servant

Song (Isa. 49:1-6). In this Song although the ultimate identity of the Servant is not specified, certain facts about the Servant are announced. The Lord called this Servant before he was born (49:1). The Servant is identified as Israel in 49:3, yet the Servant also was assigned the mission of bringing Israel back to the Lord (49:5) and of bringing light to the nations (49:6). The Servant received the designation "Israel" because as the ideal Representative of the nation, He would provide the way of restoring the people's relationship to God. While the Servant would face rejection and discouragement, He knew the Lord's will would be accomplished through Him. The Lord would expand the Servant's mission to make salvation available for all people—Gentiles as well as Jews. Through this Servant the Lord would comfort and demonstrate compassion on His people (49:1-13).

The Servant's work would have important results for Zion or Jerusalem. The people believed the Lord had abandoned them because of their sins. The Lord declared He still loved them as a loving parent loves even wayward children. The city would again be inhabited. The Lord would bring home His future exiled people who were scattered among the nations. The Lord would rescue His people from captivity and take vengeance on their enemies (49:14-26). As a result, all people would know the power of the Lord, "the Mighty One of Jacob" (49:26).

2. LOOK UP! (ISA. 50:1-11)

As Isaiah continued his prophecy, the Lord revealed to Him that the people of Israel would continue to blame the Lord for their predicament of defeat and exile. They would claim He had abandoned them. The Lord refuted His people's arguments by stating He had neither abandoned them nor lost His power to save. The Lord's control over the seas and heavens demonstrated He possessed power to save His people. On the contrary, the people suffered because of their sins (50:1-3).

Isaiah 50:4-9 constitutes what is generally recognized as the third Servant Song. In contrast to Israel, the Lord's Servant completely obeyed the Lord. Confident that the Lord's purposes would be accomplished through Him, He willingly accepted humiliation and abuse.

Verses 10-11 constitute an appeal for the people to trust in the Lord. Those who walked in the darkness of sin had tried to create their own light. However, that light would consume them rather than save them (50:10-11). As the nation had on

occasion tried to save itself through military power and alliances, the people continued to try to deliver themselves rather than trust the Lord.

3. WAKE UP! (ISA. 51:1–52:12)

The Lord called His people to wake up and remember their history. From elderly, childless Abraham and Sarah, He had raised a great nation. As He had created a nation then, He would re-create Zion. After their future judgment for their sins, He would restore His people (51:1-8).

The Israelites urged the Lord to wake up and act to save His people as He had acted in the past. The reference to Rahab (51:9) was a reference to a primeval sea monster that some ancient peoples believed existed. In this context, it represents chaos. The prophet stated the Lord possessed power over any chaotic or evil power, real or imagined. The Lord declared He alone could bring comfort and deliverance to His people. He would do so after the judgment for their sins. The people did not need to fear their human enemies. Such fear demonstrated a lack of faith in the Lord. The people needed to trust in the Lord, draw strength from Him, and wait for Him to act (51:9-16).

The Lord responded by calling His people to wake up and have faith. Their future would seem hopeless after judgment came, but He would give them new life. The cup of judgment the people would drink because of their sins would be filled again, but in this future time it would be given to the enemies of the Lord's people, resulting in destruction for them and salvation for His people (51:17-23).

In Isaiah 52:1 the Lord again issued a call to Zion to wake up. In that future time of salvation, the Lord's people would truly experience His nature and power. A messenger would come bearing the good news of salvation. The watchmen would see the messenger and understand the joyous news he brought. The inhabitants of the city that would be destroyed would later join the watchmen in praising the Lord, knowing the Lord would be victorious and salvation would belong to them. They would march forth out of their future captivity and the Lord would guide and protect them (52:1-12).

4. BOW DOWN! (ISA. 52:13–53:12)

As we prepare for Easter next Sunday, we can study no better passage in Isaiah than Isaiah 52:13–53:12, a passage in which Isaiah prophesied the suffering, death, and exaltation

of the Lord's Servant, Jesus Christ. Following the Easter lesson from Matthew 28, we will return to our study of Isaiah and cover chapters 40–48 before turning to Isaiah 54.

The Lord introduced His Servant as One who would act wisely; He would know what He needed to do to accomplish the Lord's purpose and He would obey perfectly despite the cost (Isa. 52:13). The Servant's suffering disfigured His appearance so much that many people turned away because of the sight of Him in His anguish. Many believed He suffered for His own sins; they did not realize what the Lord was doing through Him. However, the Lord would exalt Him because of His obedience in accomplishing the Lord's plan (52:13-15).

Chapter 53, Verse 2: *He grew up before Him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or splendor that we should look at Him, no appearance that we should desire Him.*

The Lord's Servant entered the world as a baby and grew up with no special physical beauty that attracted people's attention. He did not look like people expected their Savior to look. Instead, He appeared to be an unwanted young plant that sprouts from a tree's root and is cut off. People expected the Lord's Messiah to be born in a palace, tended by servants, and groomed to be impressive physically. Instead Jesus was born in a stable in a small village, raised in the less-than-desirable town of Nazareth, and humbly baptized by John.

Verse 3: *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like one people turned away from; He was despised, and we didn't value Him.*

Those who saw the Servant despised Him. The term translated *despised* did not carry the idea of strong emotional hatred in the Hebrew language but rather referred to considering someone or something as worthless and thus undervaluing of attention. Since He seemed to have no potential value, people rejected or quickly dismissed Him as having any significance.

The King James Version reads "grief" where the Holman CSB reads sickness. Both translations make the same point. While we probably do not think of Jesus becoming physically ill, He certainly knew the social and religious stigma often attached to illness. Furthermore, He also knew from experience the grief caused by hatred, rejection, and physical pain (see Pss. 22:6-7). His identification with the outcasts of

society and His experience of suffering led people to doubt the Lord could possibly work through Him to provide salvation. He appeared to be a loser, not a winner. Because He did not fit the stereotype of what the Messiah would be like, He would experience what sick individuals commonly experienced in His society: avoidance and rejection.

The coming Servant would not be recognized as the One the Lord sent to be the sacrifice for people's sins. People typically expect the Lord to work in flashy, powerful ways. When He works unexpectedly as He did through His Servant Jesus, they do not always recognize His power or purpose. Today people still have a difficult time accepting that the Lord brought salvation to us through the death of His Son. We need to open our hearts to understand the Lord worked through Jesus to provide salvation and help others know, accept, and follow Him.

Verse 4: *Yet He Himself bore our sicknesses, and He carried our pains; but we in turn regarded Him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.*

In the ancient Near East people believed individuals suffered because they had done something to deserve suffering. However, this Servant was completely without sin; He suffered for the sins of all humanity. While the term rendered *stricken* is sometimes associated with leprosy, it also can describe any misfortune or illness that occurs suddenly. The Servant did not deserve the afflictions He bore. The pains He experienced that caused people to despise Him were theirs and ours.

Verse 5: *But He was pierced because of our transgressions, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on Him, and we are healed by His wounds.*

The Servant endured horrible suffering. The word rendered *pierced* indicated a fatal injury caused by a deep stab (see Ezek. 32:26, where the term is translated "slain"). The Hebrew term has been identified as the strongest word for violent and excruciating death in the Hebrew language. The word translated *crushed* meant breaking into pieces or pulverizing (see Job 22:9). Isaiah emphasized the wounds received by the Servant constituted not just flesh wounds but blows designed to destroy physical life. The Roman flogging and crucifixion of Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy. The crown of thorns pierced Jesus' head (Matt. 27:29; Mark 15:17) and the spear pierced His side (John 19:33-34). The flogging with a whip made of leather strips embedded with pieces of metal or bone brutally tore His flesh (Matt. 27:26; John 19:1). Under di-

vine inspiration, Isaiah accurately and powerfully prophesied Jesus' suffering and death.

Jesus suffered because those in power felt threatened by Him and wanted to destroy Him completely. More importantly, Jesus suffered the horrible punishment humanity deserved for the great weight of human rebelliousness and disobedience toward the Lord. The word rendered *transgressions* also can be translated rebellion—sins willfully committed. Humanity's flagrant and consistent disobedience deserved a harsh punishment. The term *iniquities* referred to sins that demonstrate a twistedness or perversion of humanity.

Verse 6: *We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished Him for the iniquity of us all.*

The phrase *we all* indicates the extent of the problem. Humanity in general deserves punishment for sin, but so do we as individuals. We may judge some to be more sinful than others and certainly the sins of some have far greater destructive consequences, but each one of us deserves the suffering the Servant took on Himself. Sheep have one-track minds and often stray completely unaware of the danger they might face. When frightened, they tend to bolt off in any direction. As a result sheep tend to become lost.

Humans bear a remarkable resemblance to sheep, although we cannot blame our sins on others or a herd mentality. We often do what we desire, unaware of or ignoring the possible consequences. When our actions harm ourselves or others, we become helpless, unable to extricate ourselves from our dilemma. Justice would decree we bear the punishment for our sins, but instead, in love and grace, the Servant accepted the punishment that was justly ours. Those who believe in Him receive this forgiveness He has made available to all.

Verse 7: *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter and like a sheep silent before her shearers, He did not open His mouth.*

The Lord's Servant endured oppression and affliction without angry words or protest of injustice. He willingly endured suffering for others' sake not as a victim of an unjust legal system but as a willing sacrifice.

Accusing the Lord unjustly of forgetting His people or of ignoring them, the people of Israel had made loud protests to the Lord (see Isa. 40:27). In contrast, the Servant had just

reason to protest His unjust treatment, but He offered no complaint. Sheep go to the slaughterhouse or the shearer without making a sound because they do not know what waits. The Servant also went quietly, not out of ignorance but in willing submission to what He knew lay ahead (see Matt. 27:12-14; Luke 23:9).

Sheep served as a powerful metaphor for Isaiah's people. Because sheep tend to wander, his comparison of sinful people to sheep powerfully illustrates the lostness of humanity (Isa. 53:6). Since Isaiah's audience recognized sheep as typical sacrificial animals, the prophet's comparison of the Servant with a sheep emphasized His sacrificial death for us (Isa. 53:7; see John 1:29).

Verse 8: *He was taken away because of oppression and judgment; and who considered His fate? For He was cut off from the land of the living; He was struck because of My people's rebellion.*

The Savior's suffering was totally unjust. Humans should have borne the punishment for their sins, not the Lord's Servant. The Lord should have punished sinful humanity for its disobedience, not His Son. Instead of justice for us, the Lord provided grace. The term *struck* calls to mind the beatings Jesus endured (Matt. 27:26). The people assumed the Servant's suffering and death constituted punishment for wrongs He had done. Only later did some realize He suffered and died because of their rebellion.

Verse 9: *They made His grave with the wicked, and with a rich man at His death, although He had done no violence and had not spoken deceitfully.*

The Servant did not deserve the punishment He received. He deserved no punishment at all. He lived a sinless life, dying for sinful humanity. As a final insult, the Servant was regarded as Someone to be buried with executed criminals because of the manner of His death. The reference to a rich man has been viewed as a prophecy fulfilled in Jesus' burial in the tomb of the wealthy Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:57-59).

The Servant willingly submitted Himself to human injustice in order to accomplish His redemptive mission. As we reflect on Jesus' willing and complete sacrifice for us, we need to thank the Lord for His gift of salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Verse 10: *Yet the LORD was pleased to crush Him, and He made Him sick. When You make Him a restitution offering, He will see His seed, He will prolong His days, and the will of*

the LORD will succeed by His hand.

The Servant's sacrificial death and all that led up to it was used by the Lord God to provide salvation for sinful humanity. The Servant served as a restitution or guilt offering (see Lev. 5:14-19). We could never give the Lord enough to serve as a restitution offering sufficient to atone for our sins. The Lord sent His Servant to offer His life to make restitution for us.

When the Lord accepted His Servant's life as a restitution offering, He blessed the Servant and all humanity. The Servant would have sons and daughters around the world who believed in Him. He would rise from the dead to unending life with His Father.

Verse 11: *He will see it out of His anguish, and He will be satisfied with His knowledge. My righteous servant will justify many, and He will carry their iniquities.*

We can be saved because the Servant bore our iniquities. His sufficient sacrifice provides the opportunity for all to be saved. Salvation is not automatic nor does simply knowing how the Lord provided salvation save us. People are saved only when they respond to the good news of salvation in Christ with repentance and faith. We need to tell others the good news of the Lord's salvation through Christ so they can have the opportunity to believe.

Verse 12: *Therefore I will give Him the many as a portion, and He will receive the mighty as spoil, because He submitted Himself to death, and was counted among the rebels; yet He bore the sin of many and interceded for the rebels.*

Although many people viewed the Servant as a loser, He won a great victory. As Victor He would receive the spoils of battle, namely those who believe in Him. He won His victory by willingly submitting to death for our sins. Though He was counted as a rebel or sinner by many, He actually gave Himself for rebels and sinners, taking their sins on Himself, paying the price, and providing a way for people to experience reconciliation with God.

The Lord has made the Servant's sacrificial death adequate to justify sinners. We can receive Christ as Savior and thank God that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins is adequate to make all who receive Him right with God.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 12

MATTHEW 27:62–28:20

THE BACKGROUND

Following Jesus' crucifixion, the chief priests and Pharisees made a further request of Pilate. Knowing Jesus had stated He would rise again after three days, they asked Pilate to secure the tomb so His disciples could not steal the body and then say Jesus had been raised from the dead. Receiving Pilate's instructions to make the tomb as secure as they could, the Jewish leaders sealed the stone and set a guard.

Early Sunday morning as Mary Magdalene and another Mary came to the tomb, a great earthquake occurred. An angel rolled back the stone and sat on it. The guards had failed in their mission, but God had wonderfully succeeded (Matt. 27:62–28:4).

The angel calmed the women's fears. Knowing they had come to visit Jesus' tomb, the angel announced the joyous news that Jesus had been resurrected. The angel then gave the women a task. He instructed them to go tell Jesus' disciples that He had been raised from the dead and would meet them in Galilee (28:5-7).

The women quickly obeyed the angel. As they ran to inform the disciples, they met Jesus who greeted them. The women fell before Him, clasped His feet, and worshiped Him. Jesus directed them to go tell His disciples to travel to Galilee where He would meet them (28:8-10).

Meanwhile some of the guards reported to the chief priests what had occurred. The chief priests and elders determined to bribe the soldiers to spread the lie that while the soldiers slept, Jesus' disciples had stolen His body to make it appear that He had risen from the dead. Furthermore if the story that guards had slept on duty reached the governor's ears, the chief priests and elders promised to protect the soldiers and keep them out of trouble. Matthew reported the guards accepted the bribe, and their story continued to be spread among the Jewish people even as Matthew was later writing this account (28:11-15).

Jesus' disciples arrived in Galilee and saw Jesus. They worshiped Him, though some doubted His reality and resurrection. Jesus then announced that God had given Him all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, He was commissioning them to make disciples throughout the world. He promised to be with His disciples to the end of the age.

1. ABYSMAL FAILURE (MATT. 27:62–28:4)

Chapter 28. Verse 1: *After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to view the tomb.*

On Fridays Jews prepared for the Sabbath, which began at 6:00 p.m. Friday evening. On Saturday or the Sabbath, the day after preparation day, the chief priests and Pharisees came to Pilate with a request regarding Jesus' tomb. The chief priests were Sadducees and had substantial theological differences with the Pharisees, but hatred for Jesus united both groups. The chief priests and Pharisees informed Pilate Jesus had stated He would rise after three days, a prophecy Jesus had given when some of the religious leaders demanded a sign (Matt. 12:39-40; 16:4). While the chief priests and Pharisees did not believe Jesus would rise again, they considered Him a deceiver who might have instructed His disciples to steal His body after His burial to make it appear that He had been raised from the dead. The Jewish leaders realized if people believed Jesus had been raised from the dead, He would have a far greater impact than when He lived (Matt. 27:62-64).

Pilate's words recorded in Matthew 27:65 can be interpreted either as a statement indicating the chief priests should employ their own temple guards or as an order assigning Roman soldiers to the tomb. Since the guard reported to the chief priests first rather than to Pilate (28:11), some Bible scholars suggest members of the Jewish temple guard composed the contingent sent to guard Jesus' tomb. Other Bible scholars suggest the guard consisted of Roman soldiers temporarily assigned by Pilate to the chief priests since he had ultimate authority over them (28:11-15). The identification of the guard as Roman soldiers seems to best fit the political and historical circumstances. The tomb was sealed as a warning that disturbing the grave would result in punishment. The presence of the guard provided an additional deterrent (27:65-66).

The phrase *after the Sabbath* could refer to any time after early Saturday evening, but Mark referred to the time of sunrise (Mark 16:2). The discovery of Jesus' resurrection on Sunday morning resulted in the early church's establishment of Sunday as the Christian day of worship. Gathering together for worship on Sundays is a reminder that we celebrate Christ's resurrection!

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to Jesus' tomb. The second Mary probably was Mary, the mother of James

and Joseph (see Matt. 27:56). The women may have come to the tomb hoping to view and anoint Jesus' body (Mark 16:1). They knew the exact location of Jesus' tomb. These women had been present when Joseph of Arimathea had buried the body (27:61). They did not go to the wrong place, see an empty tomb, and assume Jesus had risen from the dead. They went to Jesus' tomb and received the angel's message that He had risen.

Verse 2: *Suddenly there was a violent earthquake, because an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and approached the tomb. He rolled back the stone and was sitting on it.*

As the women walked toward the tomb, an earthquake shook the ground. An earthquake had occurred when Jesus died (Matt. 27:50-51). Matthew emphasized the quake was related to the angel's descent from heaven. The quake also has been seen as attesting to the cosmic significance of what was occurring.

Typically rolling a large stone in front of a tomb entrance required the action of strong men not only because the stone was huge but also because it would have to be rolled up an incline (see Mark 16:3). The angel easily rolled back the stone. The angel's sitting on the stone perhaps indicates the fact that Christ completely triumphed over sin and death. Christ had died for the sins of humanity and risen again victorious.

The angel did not roll away the stone so Jesus could exit the tomb for His resurrected body could pass through the stone as it later passed through locked doors (John 20:19). Rather the stone was rolled from the tomb's entrance to permit the women to see inside and recognize that Jesus' body no longer lay there.

Verse 3: *His appearance was like lightning, and his robe was as white as snow.*

The angel's appearance reminds us of Jesus' appearance during His transfiguration (Matt. 17:2). His clothing glowed with the purest white. His bright appearance dazzled all who saw and helped identify him as one of God's messengers (see Acts 1:10; Rev. 15:6).

Verse 4: *The guards were so shaken from fear of him that they became like dead men.*

The earthquake, the appearance of the dazzling angel, and the rolling away of the stone petrified the guard. The soldiers, paralyzed with fear, became like dead men. How ironic that soldiers sent to guard the dead ended up becom-

ing like dead men while the One they were sent to guard rose from the dead!

In the time Jesus walked the land of the Bible, Roman soldiers constituted the greatest fighting force in the world. The guards placed at Jesus' tomb had proper authority, excellent training, and great commitment, but they failed in their assignment. They could not keep Jesus in His grave. Human might could not prevent Jesus' resurrection and human cleverness cannot succeed in explaining His resurrection away. The inability of the Roman soldiers to complete their task witnesses to God's power and Jesus' resurrection.

2. ANGELIC ANNOUNCEMENT (MATT. 28:5-7)

Verse 5: *But the angel told the women, "Don't be afraid, because I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified."*

Consistently throughout the Old and New Testaments, the appearance of angels caused fear in the beholders. Since angels serve as messengers from Almighty God, such reverence was an appropriate response. Because fear constituted the typical response to angels, they usually began their message with the words, "Don't be afraid" (see Luke 1:11-13,30; 2:8-10). The women certainly had reason to fear. After experiencing the earthquake, they saw the opened tomb and the dazzling angel sitting upon the stone. The angel's words calmed the women so they could receive the joyous news.

The angel stated he knew the women had come seeking Jesus who was crucified. The mention of Jesus' manner of death emphasized the reality He had died. He had not lapsed into a coma or pretended to be dead. The soldiers present at the crucifixion had attested to His death (see John 19:32-33). His body had been taken down from the cross and buried because He had died. Jesus did not resuscitate. He rose from the dead.

Verse 6: *He is not here! For He has been resurrected, just as He said. Come and see the place where He lay.*

The angel announced Jesus was no longer in the tomb. He had triumphed over death! The angel reminded the women Jesus had predicted His resurrection (see Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19). Immersed in grief and mourning, Jesus' followers probably did not recall His words regarding His resurrection. They had lost their Master and their world had come crashing down. The angel's announcement emphasized God's plan in Jesus' death and resurrection (see Acts 2:20-22). Jesus had known what would occur and knew that after His sacrificial death, God would triumphantly raise Him

from the dead.

The angel invited the women to look into the tomb where He lay. The angel's words testified first of all to the fact that the women had come to the correct tomb. Jesus had been buried in the very tomb outside which the angel sat. Second, the angel's words and the empty tomb provided another proof of Jesus' resurrection. The tomb lay empty!

Verse 7: *Then go quickly and tell His disciples, "He has been raised from the dead. In fact, He is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see Him there." Listen, I have told you."*

The angel gave the women a commission. After they had looked into the tomb to verify it was empty, they needed to quickly inform Jesus' disciples of His resurrection. They needed to spread the good news. The angel announced Jesus was going ahead of them to Galilee. The phrase *going ahead* is a biblical expression for a shepherd's leading his flock (see John 10:4). Jesus had earlier used shepherd imagery to describe Himself and told His disciples He would go before them to Galilee following His resurrection (Matt. 26:31-32). The reminder of Jesus' prediction of His resurrection and of His preceding them to Galilee to meet them helped the women recognize the truth of the angel's declaration that Jesus had risen from the dead.

The angel presented two proofs of Jesus' resurrection. First, he announced Jesus' resurrection as a messenger of God. Since God's word is ever true, the angel's word was true. Second, the angel offered the evidence of the empty tomb.

3. AUTHENTICATING APPEARANCE (MATT. 28:8-10)

Verse 8: *So, departing quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to tell His disciples the news.*

The women departed quickly just as the angel had instructed them. Though the angel had tried to calm them, his appearance and the news he brought overwhelmed them. Motivated by both fear and joy, the women ran to carry out the angel's command to tell Jesus' disciples.

Verse 9: *Just then Jesus met them and said, "Good morning!" They came up, took hold of His feet, and worshiped Him.*

As the women hurried off, Jesus suddenly appeared. His greeting, "Good morning," served as a typical greeting in that culture, similar to our "hello." The greeting could literally be translated "rejoice." Thus, Jesus' expression had a deeper meaning. He not only greeted the women but also

encouraged them to rejoice in His resurrection.

The women bowed before Jesus, grasped His feet, and worshiped Him. First, their actions indicated Jesus had a real body. Their hands did not pass through empty space or a ghostly presence. Their fingers grasped a tangible body. The women recognized the Jesus they had known was alive.

Second, the women's worship of Jesus indicated they realized He was God's Son. Everything He had said about Himself was true. Everything He had taught was truth. In the ancient world bowing and grasping someone's feet symbolized submission to and respect for the individual. Typically, people showed such respect and submission to a ruler. The women's response demonstrated they recognized Jesus as Lord and committed themselves to serve Him.

Verse 10: *Then Jesus told them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see Me there."*

Jesus repeated the angel's words, telling the women not to be afraid and instructing them to tell His disciples to leave for Galilee where they would see Him. Jesus called His disciples *brothers*. The disciples had abandoned Jesus as He faced arrest and trial (Matt. 26:56b). Yet Jesus forgave them, continued to love them, and claimed them as members of His spiritual family. Despite their failure, He continued to work in and through them.

The women hurried away with even greater news to tell than before. They had not only conversed with an angel and seen the empty tomb, but also they had seen, heard, touched, and worshiped the living Lord! In the ancient world a woman's testimony had no legal authority. The church, however, remembered the women as the first to witness the risen Christ and accepted and treasured their testimony. Had the church been attempting to fabricate an account of the resurrection, they would not have utilized female witnesses. Thus the women's testimony continues to provide a reason today to believe in the resurrection. People who had known Jesus during His earthly life and ministry saw and touched Him after His resurrection. They knew He had risen and, based on their testimony, we can too. We, too, can worship Him as the living Lord.

4. AUTHORITIES' LIES (MATT. 28:11-15)

Verse 11: *As they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.*

Initially the earthquake and angel's appearance had startled the guards so much they were paralyzed with fright. By this point they apparently had recovered from their shock. The tomb, like the place of the crucifixion, lay outside the city, so the men had to enter Jerusalem to report what had occurred. Since Pilate had placed the guard temporarily under the chief priests' jurisdiction, the soldiers would naturally have reported to the chief priests first (see 27:62-66).

The guard told the chief priests all that had occurred. Their account surely must have included the earthquake, the angel's descent, the rolling back of the stone, and the dazzling angel sitting upon the stone. The guard certainly saw enough to frighten them and convince them they had failed in their task.

Verse 12: *After the priests had assembled with the elders and agreed on a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money*

The chief priests and the Pharisees had requested a guard at the tomb to prevent Jesus' disciples from stealing His body and claiming He had risen. They knew that if people believed Jesus had risen from the dead, many might desert traditional Judaism that supported and empowered the priests, and follow Jesus. Intent on maintaining their power, the chief priests had no intention of believing Jesus would or had risen from the dead. After hearing the soldiers' account of the miraculous phenomena, an angelic visitation, and an empty tomb, the chief priests began planning how to explain the empty tomb and discredit any report that He had risen.

The chief priests consulted with the elders and decided to give the soldiers a large sum of money and instruct them regarding what they should report. The chief priests had paid Judas 30 pieces of silver to betray Jesus into their hands. They paid the soldiers a large sum to spread a lie regarding Jesus' resurrection. Apparently the chief priests believed money could solve their problems. Money could not ultimately stop the truth then and still cannot today.

Verse 13: *and told them, "Say this, 'His disciples came during the night and stole Him while we were sleeping.'*

The chief priests instructed the soldiers to report that Jesus' disciples came while they slept on duty and stole Jesus' body. The lie raised more concerns and questions than it answered. First, the story indicated the soldiers had failed at their task. The chief priests and Pilate had specifically sent them to guard Jesus' tomb and prevent His disciples from

stealing His body. How ironic that what they had been sent to prevent became the explanation for their failure! Second, the story raised the question of how the soldiers could have known Jesus' disciples stole His body if they were asleep!

Verse 14: *If this reaches the governor's ears, we will deal with him and keep you out of trouble."*

The soldiers knew such an unreasonable story would not only make them a laughingstock but also might result in their deaths because they would be admitting to sleeping on guard duty. The soldiers did not want to spread a story embarrassing to them, and they certainly did not want to die for a lie.

The chief priests assured the soldiers no harm would come to them. If Pilate heard the story faulting his soldiers, the chief priests would deal with the governor and save the soldiers from punishment. The chief priests probably intended to bribe Pilate as well. If the chief priests needed to bribe others up or down the chain of command, they were prepared to do so. They had crucified Jesus. Having failed to keep Him in the grave, they intended to use all their resources to attempt to kill the fact of His resurrection.

Verse 15: *So they took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been spread among Jewish people to this day.*

The soldiers accepted the chief priests' proposal and reported Jesus' disciples had come during the night and stolen His body. Matthew wrote his Gospel several decades after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The story invented by the chief priests and reported by the soldiers remained a popular explanation in Matthew's time and continues to be circulated today.

The chief priests apparently realized what God had done in Jesus threatened their prestige and power. Rather than accept the truth that Jesus is God's Son who had risen from the dead, they attempted to hide the truth behind a flimsy lie. The effort of Jesus' enemies to hide the truth of His resurrection is a reason to believe in His resurrection and to worship Him as the Lord of truth.

5. ALTERNATE CHOICES (MATT. 28:16-20)

Verse 16: *The 11 disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them.*

The mention of the 11 disciples provided a reminder of Judas's absence. After seeing Jesus taken to Pilate, Judas had thrown the money he had accepted to betray Jesus into the

sanctuary and hanged himself (Matt. 27:1-5).

The angel and Jesus had instructed the women to tell the disciples to meet Him in Galilee. The remaining disciples obeyed. Matthew did not report exactly when or where the disciples met Jesus although tradition has identified the place as Mount Tabor. Mountains formed significant places for revelation in the Bible. For example, Moses received the Ten Commandments and Elijah heard God's voice on a mountain. On a mountain in Galilee, the area in which Jesus had begun His earthly ministry (4:12-17), Jesus commissioned His disciples following His resurrection.

Verse 17: *When they saw Him, they worshiped, but some doubted.*

When the disciples saw Jesus, they worshiped Him, a natural response to their joy at seeing Jesus again and their growing understanding of who He really is. Some, however, doubted. The word *doubted* did not refer so much to unbelief as to hesitation based on uncertainty. No one had expected to see Jesus again. When they did, they found His resurrection difficult to comprehend. Much had happened in a short period of time. The doubting of some of the disciples forms another argument supporting the reality of Jesus' resurrection. Some who initially doubted later confidently became courageous witnesses.

Based on His authority, Jesus commissioned His followers to make disciples. Discipleship begins with acceptance of Christ as Savior. Those who accept Him then need to receive teaching to help them mature in their faith (28:18-20).

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 19

ISAIAH 40:1–48:22

THE BACKGROUND

The eighth-century B.C. prophet Isaiah prophesied about events related to his own generation. The Lord also gave him insight into events that lay in the future for the Lord's people. Because they refused to get right with the Lord, both the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to enemy nations. The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C., during Isaiah's ministry. The Southern Kingdom of Judah would fall to the Babylonians over one hundred thirty years later in 587 B.C. Isaiah's prophecies beginning in Isaiah 40 look ahead to the exile in Babylonia and beyond.

To a future discouraged, despairing people, the Lord offered comfort and forgiveness through His prophet. He proclaimed the end of exile in Babylon and a return home that would reveal His glory to all. What human power could not achieve, the Lord would accomplish because He is the incomparable Lord. The Lord's people would find renewed strength and life in Him, the Creator and Sustainer of all. While the gods of other nations possessed no power or knowledge, the Lord had created and guided His people and was at work to accomplish their future deliverance (Isa. 40:1–41:29).

The Lord introduced His Servant who would accomplish His purpose and bring justice to all nations. As the Lord had called His Servant, so He called His people to help others see His truth and experience His salvation. Isaiah invited the entire world to praise the Lord. Though the Lord would allow the people of Judah to suffer conquest and exile because of their sins, He also would continue to act to deliver His people. Though His people remained rebellious and unbelieving, the Lord invited them to see Him working for their salvation (42:1-25).

The Lord instructed His people not to fear because He their Creator still claimed them as His own. He would gather His people from the far corners of the earth and bring them back to their homeland because He continued to love them. The Lord could accomplish this mission because He possessed all power and had no competition. He is the only God who exists. Isaiah presented a mocking condemnation of idols as objects worshiped by deluded minds.

The Lord encouraged His people not to focus on the past but to see the new acts He would perform. To accomplish the deliverance and restoration of His people, the Lord would use the Persian King Cyrus [SIGH ruhs]. By using Cyrus the Lord would demonstrate His ultimate sovereignty (43:1–45:25).

Chapter 45 concludes with an emphasis on the reality that the Lord alone can save His people. The gods of the nations cannot guide and protect their people because the Lord alone is the only God. The Lord is sovereign over all peoples and nations. Though He would use Babylonia to punish His people, He also would punish Babylonia for its pride. The Lord would use a pagan king of Persia to accomplish His purposes. He would then instruct His people to leave Babylon in a new exodus and experience deliverance through Him (46:1–48:22).

1. DIVINE ASSURANCES (ISA. 40:1–41:29)

The Lord had called Isaiah to speak to an unresponsive people until their land and nation lay devastated (Isa. 6:9-13). Isaiah obeyed the Lord, Judah refused to repent, and the Lord eventually used Babylonia to conquer and punish His people. Isaiah did not live to see Judah's ultimate fall in 587 B.C., but his prophetic words to Judah recorded in Isaiah 40:1–66:24 provided comfort and challenge to his people in Babylonian exile and as they returned to and settled their homeland. His words continue to inspire and challenge us today.

The Lord comforted His people in exile in Babylon by telling them their time of captivity was drawing to a close. He declared they had experienced full punishment by receiving double for their sins (Isa. 40:2; see Ex. 22:7,9). The Lord would prepare a level highway so His people could return to their land. The nations would see Judah's return and recognize the Lord's power. Human power could not accomplish Judah's restoration. Only the Lord, the Good Shepherd, could and would bring His people home (Isa. 40:1-11).

Many Jews in exile had given up on ever returning home. They believed the Lord seemed powerless to help them. Isaiah declared the Lord possessed the power to bring His people home. Human hands sculpted idols, but human hands had not created the eternal God. The One who knows the stars by name knew His people's needs and would work to save and restore them (40:12-31).

The Lord condemned idolatry by emphasizing He is the only God who exists. The idols have no reality or power. They

are simply statues carved by human hands and attached to pedestals so they will not fall over. By contrast, the Lord had called Israel and had guided His people from the beginning of their existence. The Lord would deal with nations that harmed His people, strengthen His people, and provide their needs. While the mindless idols knew nothing of the future, the Lord actively directed history. He chose and prepared Cyrus through whom He would work to save His people (41:1-29).

2. DIVINE MISSION (ISA. 42:1-25)

Isaiah 42:1-4 comprised the first of Isaiah's "Servant Songs." We studied three other Servant Songs (49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13–53:12) in our lesson for April 5. The Lord commissioned His Servant to bring justice not just to Israel but to all nations. In accomplishing His mission, the Servant would act gently, but effectively (42:1-9).

Isaiah called the whole earth to sing a new song of praise to the Lord because He actively intervenes in history, prevails over His enemies, and delivers His people. The Lord would remain quiet while His people suffered the judgment of conquest and exile for their sins, but He would later act to bring judgment on those nations who trusted in idols and restore His people to their homeland (42:10-17).

When the Lord had called Isaiah, He described the people to whom Isaiah would minister as persisting in being blind and deaf to the Lord's words (6:9-10). The nation had not changed. Instead of functioning as the Lord's servant, they still ignored His call and disobeyed. Isaiah encouraged the people to remember their situation of defeat and exile resulted from their sins. After their experience of judgment, He wanted His people to accept the role of being His witnesses (42:18-25).

3. DIVINE PURPOSE (ISA. 43:1–45:25)

The Lord's redemption of His people was personal. He knew them by name. As the Lord delivered His people from Babylonian captivity, He would overcome any obstacles they faced. They could count on Him because He had been and would continue to be with them. The Lord would bring them home. While other gods could not save, the Lord could and would deliver His people (43:1-11).

The Lord, who had brought Israel out of Egypt, would bring His people out of Babylonia in a new exodus. Despite His

people's sins the Lord offered forgiveness because of His nature. Though the people's ancestors had sinned and experienced judgment, a new generation could choose a different way (43:12-28).]

The Lord told His people not to fear because He would revitalize the people with His Spirit. Isaiah then presented a biting condemnation of idols and those who worshiped them. Humans exerted great effort to create idols. They labored to shape metal and carve wood and stone. The prophet pointed out the folly of using part of a tree for firewood, while shaping the other part into an idol and bowing before it without realizing the foolish nature of their actions. Such behavior was equivalent to feeding on ashes. The Lord reminded His people of His nature and power as the living Lord. He had forgiven their sins and would give them reason to praise Him by working through the Persian King Cyrus to deliver them (44:1-28).

Chapter 45. Verse 1: *The LORD says this to Cyrus, His anointed, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him, to unloose the loins of kings, to open the doors before him and the gates will not be shut:*

Cyrus served as one of the greatest kings of the ancient Near East. When his grandfather Astyages [ass TIGH uh jeez] dreamed Cyrus would one day seize the kingship from him, Astyages sent an officer to kill Cyrus. The officer instead took the boy into the hills where a shepherd raised him. When Cyrus reached adulthood, he easily gained the Persians' confidence, raised an army, revolted against his grandfather and his father, defeated them, and became king. After ascending the throne in 559 B.C., Cyrus quickly began to create an empire. After defeating the Babylonian army, Cyrus marched on Babylon where the people welcomed him as a liberator. Cyrus's generous policies endeared him to his subjects. After conquering the Babylonians, he decreed in 539 B.C. that the captives, including the Jews, the Babylonians had taken in their conquests be allowed to return to their lands. He even provided funding to help those who chose to return and rebuild Jerusalem.

The Jews probably viewed Cyrus as just another, although more benevolent, conqueror who by his extraordinary ability had created and ruled an empire. Through Isaiah the Lord revealed that He in His sovereignty had raised Cyrus to power and given him the mission of subduing nations. The Lord referred to Cyrus as His anointed. The term *anointed* described an individual who had been anointed with oil as a symbol

of being set apart for a special task. In the Old Testament, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed.

Although Cyrus did not recognize the fact, he had been chosen by the Lord to advance the Lord's purposes in the world. The English transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning *anointed* is *messiah*, the term Jews applied to the coming deliverer whom Christians recognize as Jesus. Used in that sense, the term applies only to Jesus. The use of the term *anointed* to refer to Cyrus simply indicates the Lord had chosen to use this pagan king as His instrument even though Cyrus certainly had not earned the power and privilege by his behavior.

Those who heard of Cyrus's exploits assumed his brilliance had made him successful, but the Lord declared He empowered Cyrus so the king could conquer Babylonia and allow His people to return to their land and rebuild the temple. Through Cyrus the Lord would conquer His people's enemies. Cyrus would serve as a deliverer whom the Lord would use to free His people from Babylonian exile and bring them home.

Verse 2: *"I will go before you and level the uneven places; I will shatter the bronze doors and cut the iron bars in two.*

Many in Cyrus's time would have assumed no one could conquer Babylon, but the Lord provided Cyrus a smooth pathway into the city. When he arrived, it is reported that the citizens opened the great gates to him. The Lord's people looked for Him to save them by raising a faithful Jew and empowering him to win their freedom. By confining their expectations to one way for the Lord to work, they missed seeing the Lord's hand at work in Cyrus.

Verse 3: *I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches from secret places, so that you may know that I, the LORD, the God of Israel call you by your name.*

When a king conquered a nation, that nation's wealth passed to him. The Lord promised Cyrus his conquests would bring him great wealth. The Lord did not state Cyrus would become a believer, and no historical record indicates Cyrus ever became a believer. The pharaoh of Egypt had recognized the Lord's power through the plagues and let the people of Israel go, but he never abandoned his gods and served the Lord alone. Cyrus had the opportunity to recognize the Lord and place his faith solely in Him, but Cyrus would have to make that decision for himself.

Verse 4: *I call you by your name, because of Jacob My servant and Israel My chosen one. I give a name to you, though*

you do not know Me.

The Lord called Cyrus not to exalt or enrich him, but to carry out His promises to His people. The Lord gave Cyrus the titles of shepherd (Isa. 44:28) and anointed (45:1) even though Cyrus knew neither the Lord nor what the Lord was doing through him. The sovereign Lord empowered Cyrus to create an empire to free His people and allow them to return home.

Verse 5: *I am the LORD, and there is no other; there is no God but Me. I will strengthen you, though you do not know Me,*

The Lord has no competition from any person or so-called deity. He alone is God. Thus, the Lord could state Cyrus's power and success came solely from Him. Though Cyrus did not know Him, the Lord provided his strength. Though Cyrus did not willingly follow the Lord, He directed his paths. Though Cyrus intended only to become powerful, He would accomplish the Lord's purpose of freeing His people and allowing them to return home.

Verse 6: *so that all may know from the rising of the sun to its setting that there is no one but Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other.*

The Lord worked through Cyrus, so he might have the opportunity to know Him (45:3) and so that His people would know Him through the deliverance provided through Cyrus (45:4). Ultimately through Cyrus's actions, the Lord intended for the entire world to know Him. Though the Lord acted for His people's deliverance, His plans included bringing salvation to all who would respond and believe.

Verse 7: *I form light and create darkness, I make success and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.*

Isaiah expressed the Lord's absolute power as Creator by using polar opposites. First, Isaiah referred to the polar opposites of light and darkness in nature. The Lord created day and night. No other gods had power over nature.

Second, Isaiah referred to the polar opposites of success and disaster. The word *success* translates the Hebrew word *shalom* meaning "peace" or "wholeness." The word *disaster* renders a Hebrew word that can refer either to calamity or to moral evil. In this context the word refers to events we would consider calamitous. The Lord judged His people's persistent sins with conquest by the Babylonians and exile. After His people experienced such disaster, the Lord would act through Cyrus to deliver and restore them.

The Lord called to the heavens to rain down righteousness

and the earth to receive the nourishment so righteousness could sprout and grow. As rain waters the earth, nurturing crops, animals, and humans, so the Lord provides salvation and righteousness, bringing wholeness and life. In bringing salvation, the Lord sometimes acts in unexpected ways. Israel might wonder why and how the Lord could use Cyrus, but the Lord had created him and through him would accomplish His purposes (45:8).

Verse 9: *“Woe to the one who argues with his Maker— one clay pot among many. Does clay say to the one forming it: What are you making? Or does your work say: He has no hands?”*

Isaiah declared woe, a funeral lament, to those who disputed the Lord’s right to accomplish His purposes through the unbeliever Cyrus. To disagree with the Lord’s ordering of our lives or our world is a refusal to let Him be God. Not every question of God’s work or ways constitutes such a rebellion. However, a persistent refusal to recognize that God is in control and we are not will result in a funeral—our own.

Verse 10: *How absurd is the one who says to his father: What are you fathering? or to his mother: What are you giving birth to?”*

Isaiah also cautioned His listeners to behave as respectful rather than rebellious children to the Lord their Father. A child could not question father and mother at the moment of conception, trying to stop the giving of life or making specific genetic demands. Nor should a child disobey the instruction of godly parents. As children need to recognize and respect loving parents, so the Lord’s people need to respect and trust Him.

Verse 11: *This is what the LORD, the Holy One of Israel and its Maker, says: “Ask Me what is to happen to My sons, and instruct Me about the work of My hands.”*

As the Holy One of Israel and the Maker of His people, the Lord has the pure motives, good plans, authority, and power to bless His people. The Lord displayed His parenting skills in the exodus, freeing His people from slavery, giving them guidelines for abundant living, and bringing them into a new land. When the Israelites continued to disobey Him, He disciplined them with defeat and exile to lead them back to Him. They had no reason to question His new actions on their behalf.

Verse 12: *I made the earth, and created man on it. It was My hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host.*

Isaiah described the foolishness of humans who made idols and worshiped them (44:9-20). Such gods could not move or protect their worshipers much less rule the world, yet their worshipers never questioned these idols. In contrast, the Lord created the earth, placed humanity on it, and stretched out the heavens. He commanded His entire creation and moved the world toward the goal He intended, yet His people continually questioned Him. The Lord’s people needed to stop questioning and prepare to follow and participate in the work He was doing.

Verse 13: *I have raised him up in righteousness, and will level all roads for him. He will rebuild My city, and set My exiles free, not for a price or a bribe,” says the LORD of Hosts.*

The Creator had chosen Cyrus in righteousness. Isaiah used *righteousness* not to imply Cyrus would be a great moral example but to emphasize that Cyrus’s activities were not a result of his rightness, but of the Lord’s rightness. The Lord would grant Cyrus success in his conquests and remove all obstacles before him. Cyrus would build a great empire but in the process accomplish the Lord’s purposes of freeing the exiles, returning them to their homeland, and rebuilding Jerusalem. Although Cyrus would become wealthy from his conquests, his wealth would come as a gift from the Lord (45:3) not as a bribe to motivate Cyrus to act as the Lord desired. The Lord would employ His authority and power as Creator and Sustainer to work through Cyrus to bless His people whether or not Cyrus recognized the Lord’s power. Again announcing His superiority to pagan gods, the Lord exhorted all nations to turn to Him for salvation (45:14-25).

4. DIVINE SUPREMACY (ISA. 46:1-48:22)

The Babylonian idols could not save Babylonia, but the Lord had sustained His people from their beginnings and would continue to do so. The Lord encouraged His people to remember what He had done for them in the past because He would act again to save them (46:1-13). Babylonia the conqueror would become Babylonia the conquered (47:1-15). The Lord, who would bring deliverance through Cyrus, commanded His people to leave Babylon and experience a new exodus (48:1-22).

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR APRIL 26

ISAIAH 54:1-17

THE BACKGROUND

In the Background Passage for this lesson, the eighth-century-B.C.-prophet Isaiah looked ahead to the Babylonian exile and beyond. The prophet anticipated emotions and thoughts the Lord's people in exile would experience. They believed the Lord had abandoned them. They thought they would never return to their homeland and never again experience the Lord's forgiveness and love. Isaiah spoke prophetic words of hope and promise to those future exiles. Far from dying out in Babylonia, the Lord would increase His people's population and lead them to dispossess nations and inhabit deserted cities. Isaiah encouraged the exiles to rejoice and prepare to experience the Lord's blessings even though they could see no evidence of His promise coming true (Isa. 54:1-3).

After the people reaped the consequences of their disobedience, a new day would dawn for them. The Lord would replace the shame and humiliation of defeat and exile with the joy of restoration and renewal. While the Lord's people might feel abandoned by Him, He remained their Redeemer. In His holiness He disciplined them. In His holiness and sovereignty He would restore them (54:4-5).

As a husband reconciles with a wayward wife because he continues to love her, so the Lord would return to His people. The people's continual disobedience over centuries would result in the Lord's judgment of them with exile in Babylonia for some decades. This brief time of judgment, however, would pale in comparison with the Lord's eternal love displayed in His forgiveness of and reconciliation with His people. As the Lord had promised never again to flood the earth after the flood in Noah's time, so He promised never again to be angry with His people whom He allowed the Babylonians to conquer. Though the mountains shake and crumble, His love would remain constant (54:6-10).

Jerusalem would experience the storms of conquest and abandonment. However, after those storms, the Lord would rebuild and repopulate the storm-tossed city and give it beauty, strength, and stability. Greater than the foundations and structures of precious stones would be Jerusalem's foundation in righteousness. Jerusalem's inhabitants would not need to fear because the Lord would protect them. The

Lord would prevent those who forged and wielded weapons from conquering Jerusalem. If anyone brought legal charges against Jerusalem, the Lord would defend His people and refute the charges. He would make His people righteous and provide stability and security for them (54:11-17).

1. TIME FOR REJOICING (ISA. 54:1-3)

Verse 1: *“Rejoice, barren one, who did not give birth; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the forsaken one will be more than the children of the married woman,” says the LORD.*

After Babylonia's future defeat of Judah, those in the ruined city of Jerusalem and those in Babylonian exile would feel abandoned by the Lord (Isa. 49:14) and would wonder if they and their nation would cease to exist. Through Isaiah the Lord declared He would not abandon His people or let them fade away through either death or absorption into other nations and cultures. The Lord commanded His people to rejoice because He would move within them again and bring life.

The Lord compared the conquered city of Jerusalem with a childless wife. Some wives today choose not to have children while others are unable to have children. Modern society typically scorns neither group. In the ancient world, however, society viewed childlessness quite differently. One of a wife's purposes was to produce children, especially sons, to inherit from her husband and carry on his name and memory. A barren wife failed in this responsibility by providing neither a future for her husband nor for herself.

The Bible contains several accounts of women who suffered because of their inability to bear children. Abraham's wife Sarah was 90 years old before the Lord finally blessed her with Isaac. Hannah endured taunting by her husband's other wife because Hannah remained childless. Finally the Lord answered Hannah's prayers, and she gave birth to Samuel. Elizabeth was quite old when she finally gave birth to John, the prophet who prepared the way for Jesus. Although these women eventually had children, their intense longing to bear children emphasized the importance of having children and the shame of barrenness.

Approximately one hundred fifty years after the ministry of the eighth-century B.C. prophet Isaiah, the Lord's defeated people in Judah and in exile would view themselves as barren with little hope for a future. Nevertheless, the Lord directed His hopeless people to rejoice in those circumstances.

Even though they could see no immediate evidence of the Lord's blessing and activity, the Lord stated He would rebuild His people and nation. As Jacob's unwanted wife Leah bore more children than his beloved wife Rachel, so the Lord would bless His people who felt abandoned by causing them to multiply. Their restoration would not result from their natural fruitfulness, but from the Lord's steadfast love and activity. The Lord would replace hopelessness with new life. He would give His people a future.

Verse 2: *“Enlarge the site of your tent, and let your tent curtains be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your ropes, and drive your pegs deep.*

Isaiah's words provided a powerful illustration of the Lord's promise and a call for the Lord's people to act before they began to see the Lord's promises fulfilled. In the ancient world women typically maintained and pitched the tents. The Lord directed His barren people to find a bigger campsite and stretch the fabric of their tent to the limit to prepare for the many children the Lord would give them. They needed to lengthen the ropes anchoring the tent to the pegs and drive the pegs deep into the ground to provide a large, strong shelter for their coming huge family.

The Lord's people who would experience exile in the future needed to abandon hopelessness and look confidently to the Lord for new life and a new future in those circumstances. Rather than continuing to mourn because of their sins and the consequences of those sins, they needed to rejoice in the Lord's coming salvation and begin to become a firmly committed and actively serving people, who would be able to nurture their children and grandchildren in faith.

Verse 3: *For you will spread out to the right and to the left, and your descendants will dispossess nations and inhabit the desolate cities.*

When the Babylonian army attacked Judah in the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C., some people fled to other nations, some died in battle, and some were taken to exile in Babylon. Many towns and villages lay in ruins and uninhabited. Those who remained in the land were no match for people from neighboring areas who moved in to claim the fields and towns for themselves. Nevertheless, the Lord declared He would reestablish His people in their land. As the people of Israel had dispossessed the nations in Canaan under Joshua's leadership and the Lord's power, so the Lord's people would once again dispossess those who would take their land.

2. TIME FOR RESTORATION (ISA. 54:4-5)

Verse 4: *“Do not be afraid, for you will not be put to shame; don’t be humiliated, for you will not be disgraced. For you will forget the shame of your youth, and you will no longer remember the disgrace of your widowhood.”*

The Lord instructed the future exiles in Babylon to rejoice and prepare for Him to greatly multiply them. Rejoicing and preparing for a new, grand future would be difficult for the exiles because they would know their sins had led to Judah’s conquest, Jerusalem’s destruction, and their exile. They would feel shame for their actions and the horrible consequences. Some would wonder if the Lord existed or cared. Some would erroneously believe He was unable to save His people from the Babylonian army.

Isaiah encouraged these future defeated people to forget the past. While they had sinned and experienced the consequences, the Lord would forgive their sins and restore them. While their circumstances might lead them to erroneously believe the Lord could not or would not care for His people, the Lord possessed both the power and desire and was already at work to make their restoration a reality.

Some Bible scholars suggest the phrase *the shame of your youth* refers to Israel’s experience in Egyptian slavery and the phrase *the disgrace of your widowhood* designates the Babylonian exile. As the Lord redeemed His people from Egypt and brought them into the land of Canaan, so He would redeem His people from future Babylonian captivity and bring them back to their land. Isaiah’s focus probably was primarily on the shame associated with exile. There the people would experience the Babylonians mocking their God. They would spend their lives dealing with the consequences of their sins and Judah’s fall. Like Sarah who bore the shame of childlessness for decades before finally bearing a son, the exiles’ life would be one of shame and humiliation. They would long to forget their shame and disgrace but would wonder if such a miracle could occur.

Verse 5: *For your husband is your Maker—His name is Yahweh of Hosts—and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth.*

Using four titles to describe the Lord, Isaiah assured the future exiles they could forget the past and look to a new future. First, the Lord was not only their husband but also their Maker. A human husband could do nothing to help his barren wife conceive, but the Lord not only was Husband to the barren exiles, He also was their Maker. He who had

made them and would discipline them also could multiply and restore them.

Second, as Yahweh of Hosts, the Lord possessed the power to accomplish His purposes. The designation *Yahweh of Hosts* emphasized the Lord’s sovereignty over His heavenly host and over all the universe. As absolute Monarch, He possessed total authority and power to accomplish His will.

Third, the Lord who was the Holy One of Israel served also as His people’s Redeemer. In contrast to unholy, impure humanity the Lord is perfect purity. Yet the holy God chose not to remain separated from these sinful future exiles; rather He desired to bring them out of exile and restore them to their land. As Boaz redeemed Ruth and became her faithful husband (Ruth 4:1-17), so the Lord would redeem the future exiles and be their faithful Husband.

Finally, Isaiah emphasized the Lord’s power again by describing Him as the God of all the earth. He possessed all authority and power and could accomplish anything He desired anywhere in the world. The Lord also demonstrated a steadfast love for and commitment to His people that led Him to act in their best interests. He would not fail to rescue His people from Babylonia. Although the Lord would use the Babylonians to discipline His people to bring them back to Him, His defeated people could confidently look forward to a future in which their sins would be forgiven and their nation would be restored. Such blessings would occur because of the Lord’s power and love.

3. TIME FOR RECONCILIATION (ISA. 54:6-10)

Verse 6: *For the LORD has called you, like a wife deserted and wounded in spirit, a wife of one’s youth when she is rejected,” says your God.*

Isaiah employed another marriage image to describe the future exiles in Babylon. This time he depicted the people as a wife whose actions have caused her husband to reject her. The first days of marriage, when love was passionate, the future looked bright, and the marriage seemed it would surely last forever, had given way to rejection and despair. As the wife considered her situation, she realized her loss occurred because of her failure to remain true to her husband. The people looked back on the nation’s first days as the Lord’s bride when the Lord had delivered them from Egypt, led them through the wilderness, and brought them into Canaan. Those wonderful days had given way to judgment because of their continued sins. The Lord’s future judg-

ment of His people in exile, however, would constitute His effort to bring them back to Him. He would call them back to a deep personal relationship with Him.

Verse 7: *“I deserted you for a brief moment, but I will take you back with great compassion.”*

The Lord stated He had deserted His people for a brief moment. The Babylonian exile would last roughly 70 years, which certainly would seem like more than a brief moment to the future exiles. From the Lord’s perspective, however, His judgment of His people and their future time in exile comprised a brief moment, especially in light of the centuries of disobedience that had preceded these events. The future exiles needed to see their experience in the context of the great sweep of time and the Lord’s purposes in order to get the proper perspective.

The Hebrew word translated *compassion* bears a close relationship to the Hebrew word for *womb* and thus expresses the strong attachment a good mother and father holds for their infant. Knowing infants cannot care for their own needs, parents show compassion by providing the infant with nourishment, clothing, and security. The Lord, who possesses all authority and power (Isa. 54:5), actively sought not to destroy, but to care for and guide His weak and disobedient people with unending, tender compassion.

Verse 8: *In a surge of anger I hid My face from you for a moment, but I will have compassion on you with everlasting love,” says the LORD your Redeemer.*

The Hebrew word translated *anger* in this verse is not the typical word used to describe the Lord’s anger and can mean “indignation.” The Lord’s anger is an expression of His justice and is tempered by His compassion. In fact it is because He loves His people, that He cares enough to discipline them in order to bring them back to the right way. While the Lord would judge His people for their sins by allowing them to go into exile, He would not give full vent to His anger nor allow His anger to define any further actions toward His people.

Verse 9: *“For this is like the days of Noah to Me: when I swore that the waters of Noah would never flood the earth again, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you or rebuke you.”*

The Lord’s love would not seem everlasting to the future exiles. They would lose loved ones, their nation, and hope. To assure them of the everlasting nature of His love and the dependability of His promise, the Lord reminded them of His promise to Noah and all humanity after the flood. To

judge humanity's evil the Lord flooded the entire earth. A brief time of the Lord's judgment was followed by His loving, eternal promise. After the flood waters receded and Noah and his family had exited the ark, the Lord promised never again to flood the earth (Gen. 9:11). As a sign of His promise, the Lord placed the rainbow in the sky. When people saw the rainbow, they would remember and celebrate the Lord's faithfulness to His promise. The Lord's promise to His people recorded in Isaiah 54:9 certainly did not mean He never intended to discipline them again when they sinned. It did mean the Lord's anger would be limited in its effects.

Verse 10: *Though the mountains move and the hills shake, My love will not be removed from you and My covenant of peace will not be shaken," says your compassionate LORD.*

To further illustrate the lasting nature of His promise to the future exiles, the Lord compared His promise with the mountains and hills, the most permanent parts of creation. Though earthquakes might shake the mountains, nothing would ever shake the Lord's promise to His people. He would never remove His love from His people. His covenant of peace would remain in force forever. The word *peace* referred to wholeness. The Lord promised consistently to relate to and act for the benefit of His people so they might enjoy abundant life.

4. TIME FOR STABILIZATION (ISA. 54:11-17)

The Lord contrasted the sad condition of the future exiles with the bright future that lay beyond their exile. He acknowledged the horrible conditions the exiles would face. He knew they would have good reasons for feeling shame and despair. However, the Lord promised His storm-tossed people would not remain in that condition. Setting stones in black mortar allowed an artist to create strikingly beautiful, colorful mosaics making use of lovely precious stones. Jerusalem during the exile would lie in ruins and be inhabited by poor people struggling to make a living. Those living in the future Jerusalem, however, would experience the Lord's blessings (Isa. 54:11-12).

The Lord intended to develop a deep, spiritual relationship between Himself and His people that would provide them security in every aspect of life. Without a relationship with the Lord, people have no ultimate security no matter how wealthy, intelligent, or powerful they may become. Righteousness and peace can be found only in Him (54:13-14).

As Lord of history, the Lord would bring the Babylonians

against His people and send some of them into exile. As continuing Lord of history, He would ensure those who attacked His people would ultimately fail. Through deep, personal relationship with the Lord, the Lord's people would have a spiritual inheritance no nation could overcome. From Him they would receive righteousness not as a reward for service, but as a gift (54:15-17).