

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 2009

THE PROPHECIES OF ISAIAH AND MICAH—INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ISAIAH AND MICAH

During the first half of the eighth century B.C., the Northern Kingdom of Israel ruled by Jeroboam II and the Southern Kingdom of Judah ruled by Uzziah enjoyed relative freedom from foreign interference. Assyria's weakness allowed Israel and Judah to prosper, a condition both nations interpreted as a sign of God's pleasure. Rather than thanking God and following Him, the people worshiped other gods and abused and oppressed others to satisfy their selfish desires. Around the middle of the eighth century B.C., God sent Amos and Hosea to call the people of the Northern Kingdom back to Him, but few listened.

When Tiglath-Pileser III [TIG lath-pih LEE zuhr], also known as Pul and ruled 745-727 B.C., became the Assyrian king, he quickly established himself as sovereign over all previous Assyrian territories and moved to expand his empire. Israel soon was forced to pay tribute to Assyria (2 Kings 15:19). When Ahaz, who ruled 735-715 B.C., became king in Judah, he refused to join Syria and Israel in an attack on Assyria. When Syria and Israel attacked Judah in an attempt to force Judah to join their alliance, Ahaz appealed to Assyria for help. Tiglath-Pileser III conquered Syria, subdued Israel, and made Ahaz an Assyrian vassal, thereby placing a heavy tax burden on Judah.

When Tiglath-Pileser III died, Assyria's vassal states probably rejoiced and hoped they could break free of Assyrian domination. Unfortunately, Pul's son Shalmaneser V [SHAL muh NEE zuhr], who ruled 727-722 B.C., proved quite capable and moved to besiege Samaria in 725 B.C. The city fell in the year Sargon II became the Assyrian king (722 B.C.). Rather than turning to God, Ahaz placed his faith in other gods and in military power and alliances.

Though Hezekiah ruled Judah a long time (715-686 B.C.), he faced major threats from the Assyrians on at least two occasions. The first occurred in 711 B.C. when Sargon II crushed a rebellion in the Philistine area of Ashdod. When Hezekiah was tempted to join with Ashdod because he expected assistance from Egypt, Isaiah warned Judah not to depend on Egypt (see Isa. 20:1-6). The second occasion occurred in 701

B.C. when Sennacherib [suh NAK uh rib], who ruled Assyria 705-681 B.C., entered Judah to bring the rebellious Hezekiah in line. God's miraculous intervention saved Jerusalem, but Judah remained subject to Assyria (see 2 Kings 18-19; Isa. 36-37).

Assurbanipal [ass uhr-BAN ih pal], who died in 627 B.C., was Assyria's last great king. Nebuchadnezzar [NEB yoo kad NEZ uhr] of Babylon defeated the remnants of the Assyrian army in 605 B.C. at Carchemish [KAHR kem ish] and in 587 B.C. conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem. Although Isaiah and Micah died long before Babylon created an empire, God enabled both of them to prophesy He would use Babylon to punish His people's sins. Through the prophecy of Isaiah God also spoke words of comfort and challenge to the Jews who would later be exiles in Babylon and words of encouragement and warning to those who would later return to Judah from Babylon.

ISAIAH'S LIFE

Isaiah prophesied from 740 to 690 B.C. His name means "the Lord saves." He condemned his people for their lack of faith in the Lord. Isaiah's father Amoz may have functioned in the royal court as a scribe, a position Isaiah may have held as well (2 Chron. 26:22; 32:32). The Bible refers to Isaiah's wife as a prophetess (Isa. 8:3), a title probably indicating she was married to a prophet. Isaiah and his wife had at least two sons, Shear-jashub [SHEE ahr-JAY shuhb], meaning "a remnant will return," (see 7:3), and Maher-shalal-hash-baz [MAY hehr-SHAL al-HASH baz], meaning "quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil," (see 8:3). The names of both sons served as prophetic messages to Judah's king and people.

THEMES IN ISAIAH

Isaiah encountered the Lord in a vision (see Isa. 6:1-13). That vision underscored God's holiness. Isaiah frequently referred to the Lord as "the Holy One of Israel." The concept of the Lord's holiness emphasizes His difference from anything in creation and His moral perfection. Humans always fall short in their worship and service to the holy God because they are sinners.

Isaiah condemned his people and their leaders for their dependence on military alliances with foreign powers and for their meaningless religious ritual. He urged them to repent, but they refused. Isaiah recognized Assyria and Babylon as instruments of God's judgment. After the Lord had

brought purifying judgment on His people, He would restore them because of His love and faithfulness.

Chapters 40-66 record Isaiah's prophecies concerning the later exiles in Babylon shortly before and extending until long after the Persians allowed them to return to Judah. God offered His people comfort by declaring the end to their punishment (see Isa. 40:1-2). Isaiah prophesied the coming of the Servant who would bear His people's sins, suffer horribly, and die so they might experience forgiveness and life—a prophecy fulfilled in the coming of Christ (for example, see 52:13-53:12). Despite the Lord's judgment and restoration of His people, they continued to sin. God reminded them of the need to repent and live for Him in obedience and compassion. The Lord's people could experience a bright future through faith in Him. The theme of faith in the Lord as the only Source of true security runs throughout the book.

MICAH'S LIFE

Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, served as a prophet from 740-700 B.C. His name means "Who is like the Lord?" Both his name and his message emphasized the incomparable greatness of God and the responsibility of all people to recognize Him as Lord and worship and serve Him. Micah came from Moresheth-gath [MOR reh sheth-GATH], a village located about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem in the tribal territory of Judah. Almost nothing is known of Micah's personal life.

THEMES IN MICAH

Micah condemned the people of Israel and Judah for their rebellion against the Lord, worship of idols, and ungodly lifestyles. Political and religious leaders sought their own selfish desires. They abused and oppressed others to get what they wanted. The Lord would surely judge His people's sins by allowing both nations and their capital cities to be destroyed. Yet the Lord would not abandon His people. After judgment, He would restore them and purify them. Nations would come to Jerusalem to seek the Lord and commit to serve Him (Mic. 4:1-4).

In a lawsuit against His people, the Lord questioned why His people had abandoned Him after He had done so much for them. He declared that rather than religious ritual, He desired His people to live with righteousness and steadfast love in relationship to Him and others (see Mic. 6:1-8).

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 1

ISAIAH 1:1–5:30

THE BACKGROUND

Isaiah's ministry as God's prophet extended almost five decades from the death of King Uzziah [uh ZIGH uh] of Judah in 740 B.C. to approximately 690 B.C. For much of Isaiah's ministry, the Southern Kingdom of Judah enjoyed a period of relative prosperity, but the rising power of Assyria threatened Judah's ease. The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in 722 B.C. with the conquest of Samaria, its capital city. Though Jerusalem, the capital of the Southern Kingdom, did not fall until many years later, the nation became a vassal of Assyria and was forced to pay substantial tribute (see 2 Chron. 28:20-21).

Israel and Judah faced internal problems as well as external ones. The quest for prosperity and security led people to turn to pagan gods whose worshipers erroneously believed promised fertility of the land and thus, wealth and security. Society began to crumble as people focused on achieving their selfish desires rather than on meeting God's expectations. A small group became wealthy by taking advantage of others, thereby reducing most of the population to barely scraping by.

Isaiah 1:1–5:30 is a record of the Lord's message through Isaiah that reminds the people of His creation of and care for Israel, condemns the people's actions, and calls them back to Himself. The Lord had cared for His people as a parent, providing them with freedom, a land, and guidelines for serving Him and caring for each other. In response, the people had rejected Him (Isa. 1:2). They had traded faith in the living, holy God for the worship of powerless, uncaring idols (2:8).

The people continued to worship the Lord according to tradition, but He refused to accept His people's empty rituals (1:11-15). They had rejected the Lord's expectations of righteousness and justice. Leaders oppressed their people (3:14-15) while their spoiled wives wore lavish clothing, jewelry, and perfume purchased at the expense of the poor (3:16-24). The Lord would punish His people and leave them devastated in the land, but He would not abandon them. His people had a future if they turned to Him and sought to live by His expectations (1:26).

1. CALLING FOR PURITY (ISA. 1:1-31)

The Book of Isaiah opens with a historical note indicating the time period in which Isaiah prophesied (1:1). Although in Isaiah's time the designation *Israel* referred specifically to the Northern Kingdom, the term could also be used to refer to both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, all God's people. The Lord's message targeted all Israel (1:3). As His people, both nations needed to make substantial changes as quickly as possible.

Isaiah portrayed the Lord as a loving parent who had done everything possible to raise His child Israel well. However, in response, Israel had rebelled against God, ignoring Him and His commandments. Even unintelligent animals know who cares for them, but the people of Israel refused to recognize God as their Lord and Shepherd. The people's refusal to know the Lord personally left them abandoned and desolate (1:1-9).

The people believed they could secure the Lord's blessings simply by performing their worship rituals. They believed they only had to meet the Lord's expectations through worship rituals, not in daily behavior. However, the Lord rejected their worship and called them to live based on a deep, personal relationship with Him. The people needed to stop their sinful actions, learn what God expected, and then focus on applying God's standards in their relationships with Him and others (1:10-17).

Hope remained for the people. The Lord could wash them clean and give them peace and security but only if they returned to and followed Him. If the people persisted in their sins, they would experience the Lord's judgment (1:18-20). Israel's current level of sin offered little hope the people would repent and turn again to the Lord. Their destruction appeared certain. Yet the Lord also decreed punishment would not be His final word. Beyond judgment, He would restore His people and make them once again what He intended (1:21-31).

2. COMING PEACE AND PENALTY (ISA. 2:1-4:1)

In Isaiah's time the Lord's own people lacked knowledge of Him (1:3), but someday the nations would flock to Jerusalem to know the Lord and to walk in His paths (2:1-4). In Isaiah's time even the people of Israel worshiped idols (2:8), but someday people of all nations would recognize the Lord as the only true God and seek His instruction. In the future kingdom of God that Isaiah saw coming, nations would look

to the Lord to resolve their disputes. Weapons would no longer be necessary to create security. People would look to the Lord and live together in harmony (2:1-4).

In 2:5 Isaiah called his listeners to change their behavior based on their knowledge of what the Lord would do in the future. They were trusting only in the things they could see and from which they could profit. They looked to such things as strong city walls for protection and ships that promised untold wealth through trade. However, the Day of the Lord, a day of judgment was coming. The Lord would destroy those things that represented the people's pride and their thirst for wealth and power. As their world crumbled, the people would try to hide from destruction, but no place would protect them from the Lord's cleansing judgment. The Lord would seek to bring His people back to Him by removing those things in which they had misplaced their trust (2:5-22).

Israel's military, political, and religious leaders had failed. Rather than leading the people in repentance, the leaders had sought their own welfare at the expense of others and had crushed their own people to enrich themselves. They would experience the Lord's sweeping judgment. In their place, inexperienced and unqualified people would be elevated to positions of leadership (3:1-12).

The Lord summoned the leaders to court and charged them with abusing and profiting from their leadership roles. Instead of providing guidance and care, the leaders had plundered the people to satisfy their own greedy desires for wealth and power (3:13-15).

Even the leaders' wives had been infected by greed. They walked about in their finery, purchased at the expense of others, enjoying their wealth and status and demanding more. As fitting punishment the Lord would take away their high fashion and beauty. When their husbands died in the coming destruction, these women would plead with any man to marry and care for them (3:16-4:1).

3. CLEANSING PEOPLE (ISA. 4:2-6)

Following the Lord's re-creation of Jerusalem after the cleansing of the Day of the Lord, it would flourish with a beauty of holiness and obedience only the Lord could create. The designation "branch" sometimes referred to the Messiah (Isa. 4:2; see Jer. 23:5; Zech. 3:8), but in this context the term may refer to the remnant of God's people that survived or even to the renewed fertility of the land. Having been washed clean of their sins and purified by the fire of the Lord's judgment,

the remnant who remained would finally constitute the holy people the Lord always intended them to be (Ex. 19:6).

In the new Jerusalem, the Lord's presence would constantly dwell providing the security and well-being His people previously had sought from the wrong sources. As in the days of the Lord's guiding the Israelites through the wilderness, a cloud by day and a fire by night would signify the Lord's continual presence with His people (Isa. 4:5; Num. 9:15-23). In the Lord the people would find safety from all threats. They would experience abundant life.

4. CONTEMPLATING PRODUCTION (ISA. 5:1-30)

Verse 1: *I will sing about the one I love, a song about my loved one's vineyard: The one I love had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.*

The vehicle of this message Isaiah received from the Lord was a parable in song. Bible students typically refer to Isaiah 5:1-7 as the "Song of the Vineyard." The Lord's people in Old Testament times understood well the image of a vineyard. The prophets employed the vineyard as a metaphor for God's people (Jer. 12:10; Ezek. 19:10). Isaiah had condemned the nation's elders and leaders for devastating and plundering the vineyard of Judah (Isa. 3:14). In Isaiah 5:1-7 the prophet returned to the vineyard imagery to describe the Lord's gracious nurturing of Judah and Israel and His people's rejection of Him.

After hearing Isaiah's previous messages of condemnation, his audience might have breathed a welcome sigh of relief when he began to sing. Isaiah sang about the One he loved, indicating the deeply personal relationship he had with the Lord. Isaiah did not envision the Lord as a set of rules or an impersonal, uncaring Being. He understood the Lord to be the living God who desired to be intimately involved with all people and who wanted them to return His love by loving and serving Him.

The prophet sang about One who had planted a vineyard in an extremely fertile location. The word *hill* translates a Hebrew word typically rendered "horn." Apparently the vineyard occupied a portion of a hill that jutted out as a horn juts out from an animal's head. In such a location, no one who passed by could fail to see the vineyard owner's progress and finished product. The success or failure of the vineyard would be obvious.

Verse 2: *He broke up the soil, cleared it of stones, and planted it with the finest vines. He built a tower in the middle*

of it and even hewed out a winepress there. He expected it to yield good grapes, but it yielded worthless grapes.

The vineyard's Owner invested extensive time and effort in preparing the finest vineyard. The Hebrew verb translated *broke up* occurs only here in the Old Testament and describes the intensive, backbreaking work of digging into hard ground for the first time. The many limestone deposits in the land of the Bible created a rich, fertile soil but also resulted in many rocks lying on and just below the ground's surface. Successful agriculture in Israel necessitated the clearing of most of the larger stones, so young plants or vines could take root and thrive. The vineyard's Owner thoroughly cleared the field, removing all the stones and preparing the ideal soil for grapevines to flourish.

After perfectly preparing the vineyard's soil, the Owner planted the best grapevines. The Hebrew word translated *finest vines* occurs elsewhere as the name of a valley (Sorek Valley in Judg. 16:4) and in another form as the name of a town (Masrekah in Gen. 36:36), locations famous for their fine vineyards. These vines produced superior grapes.

Having created the perfect conditions for growing grapes and having planted the finest vines, the vineyard's Owner continued to prepare His vineyard for the bumper crop sure to come. Once the vines were planted, there would be an interval of about two years before they yielded fruit.

A farmer might throw stones cleared from a field onto the road or he might use the stones to build a wall around the field to keep animals from eating his crop. This vineyard Owner used the stones to build a wall and a watchtower. A watchtower provided temporary quarters so a farmer could guard his crop from hungry animals and thieving humans. In most cases, a watchtower consisted of a rough elevated platform with palm branches as a roof. However, this vineyard Owner built a sturdy stone watchtower. He planned on His vineyard producing fruit for generations to come.

Although a couple of years would pass before the vineyard produced a usable crop, the Owner carved out a winepress to process the grapes when the time came. Typically a winepress consisted of two vats connected by a shallow trough, one vat slightly uphill of the other. The top vat often had plaster or wood insulation. In that upper vat, workers would press the grapes. The juice would run down a shallow connecting trench and settle in the lower vat.

The vineyard Owner's work indicated His commitment and His expectation of a bumper crop. In contrast to His expecta-

tions, however, the first crop consisted not of delicious fruit but rather worthless grapes. The Hebrew word translated *worthless grapes* is derived from a verb meaning "to stink." The stinking grapes were absolutely useless.

The vineyard Owner had created a perfect growing place with the finest vines. He had every right and expectation to reap a bountiful crop. Likewise the Lord lovingly planted His people in a fertile land, expecting them to produce the good fruit of justice and righteousness, but the people disappointed Him. The Lord has provided us with everything we need to live godly and spiritually productive lives. We have His Word, His Spirit, access to Him through prayer, and fellow believers who can provide guidance and encouragement. The Lord has every right to expect we will live as He desires. We need to acknowledge the Lord's expectations for us as believers and resolve to live closer to His expectations.

Verse 3: *So now, residents of Jerusalem and men of Judah, please judge between Me and My vineyard.*

Isaiah had sung about a perfectly prepared vineyard that had yielded a rotten crop. He then delivered the message the Lord, the vineyard Owner, directed toward His people in Jerusalem and Judah. As the prophet Nathan had confronted David with a story of injustice and asked David to render a judgment that incriminated him (2 Sam. 12:1-15), so the Lord through Isaiah asked His people to consider the case of the vineyard that had produced unusable fruit. Isaiah's audience, as well as readers today, could empathize with the vineyard Owner. We have all invested effort in something that did not produce as we had hoped. We have felt the bitter disappointment and frustration that resulted. Perhaps we have even felt angry and betrayed.

Verse 4: *What more could I have done for My vineyard than I did? Why, when I expected a yield of good grapes, did it yield worthless grapes?*

Through Isaiah the Lord asked what else He could possibly have done to ensure a good crop. How could such a poor crop have come from such an ideal environment and such choice vines? Perhaps someone in the audience shouted out, "Nothing" in response to the question voiced by the prophet. "You did everything and more. Destroy the useless vineyard!" No blame could possibly rest with the Owner.

Verse 5: *Now I will tell you what I am about to do to My vineyard: I will remove its hedge, and it will be consumed; I will tear down its wall, and it will be trampled.*

The Lord declared He would remove His protection

from the vineyard, thereby exposing it to wild animals and thieves. Apparently a hedge supplemented the stone wall protecting the choice vines from any threat. The Lord would not simply let the vineyard's protective surroundings fall into disrepair. He would uproot the hedge and tear down the wall. The Owner would let the area return to its original rocky condition.

Verse 6: *I will make it a wasteland. It will not be pruned or weeded; thorns and briers will grow up. I will also give orders to the clouds that rain should not fall on it.*

The Lord, the vineyard Owner, would make the fertile area into a wasteland. No one would prune the vines or cultivate the ground. Thorns and briers would grow up to choke out the choice vines. While thorns and briers would naturally take over an abandoned field, the reference to thorns and briers also calls to mind the Lord's curse on the ground as punishment for Adam's disobedience in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:18). Just as Adam had borne the consequences of his failure to meet the Lord's expectations, so would the people of Judah.

Stone walls crumble and thorns and briers overtake an abandoned field, but only the Lord can withhold rain. As Isaiah conveyed the Lord's words of judgment on the vineyard, his audience must have begun to see the application to themselves. The people surely began to realize Isaiah's message was not primarily about an industrious vineyard owner who had an unproductive vineyard but rather about themselves as the Lord's unproductive people.

Verse 7: *For the vineyard of the LORD of Hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah, the plant He delighted in. He looked for justice but saw injustice, for righteousness, but heard cries of wretchedness.*

At this point Isaiah made the interpretation of his song crystal clear for his audience. The vineyard belonged to the Lord and constituted Israel and Judah. The Lord had brought His people out of slavery, given them His law so they could live in harmony with Him and each other, and led them into the land He had promised their forefathers. He had delighted in His people and expected they would delight in Him. Instead His people had spurned His love and guidance and had gone their own way, pursuing their own desires through unrighteousness and idolatry. The judgment that came on the useless vineyard would come on Israel and Judah.

Isaiah masterfully demonstrated Israel's and Judah's disobedience through wordplay. The Hebrew words translated

justice and *injustice* sound almost identical as do the Hebrew words translated *righteousness* and *cries of wretchedness*. While the words sound very similar, they describe actions and lifestyles diametrically opposed to one another.

The Lord expected justice and righteousness from His people. *Justice* involved ensuring wrongs were righted so the less fortunate people in society might enjoy protection, security, and life. *Righteousness* referred to living in right relationship with others, relationships that fostered well-being and not abuse. Such positive attributes and practices had once characterized Jerusalem and the Lord's people (Isa. 1:21), but in Isaiah's time injustice and oppression had replaced those positive practices. The weaker members of society suffered exploitation and violence. Oppressed individuals cried out for relief but received none. For wealthy and powerful individuals, life was lived on easy street. For the exploited poor, however, life became an intolerable existence. The Lord's people looked out for their own interests, not caring for or about anyone else. Such actions on the part of the Lord's people resulted in His judgment.

Verse 8: *Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field until there is no more room and you alone are left in the land.*

The expression woe introduces a series of six judgment proclamations upon the Lord's people (see 5:8,11,18,20,21,22). The term conveyed the certainty of judgment. Since people used the word woe as an expression of mourning, the term also indicated the Lord's and Isaiah's grief at the people's sins.

The Lord had provided His people with the land, but in reality the land belonged to Him (Lev. 25:23). Land was to remain within the family, passed from one generation to the next (Num. 27:1-11). If financial circumstances necessitated selling the land, the transfer was to be only temporary. During the Year of Jubilee that occurred every 50 years, land that had been sold was to be returned to the original family that owned it (Lev. 25:23-28).

By Isaiah's time a wealthy class had emerged who were intent on becoming wealthier. Using unethical means, they enriched themselves by forcing poor people to sell their property. As a result, a class of society developed that lacked homes, livelihood, and civil rights. The rich landowners joined their newly purchased plots of land together to create large estates.

Verse 9: *In my hearing the LORD of Hosts has taken an*

oath: Indeed, many houses will become desolate, grand and lovely ones without inhabitants.

The Lord declared He would judge the wealthy land-grabbers appropriately. Enemy armies would invade the land and destroy the inhabitants. The grand homes the wealthy landowners built would lie empty and decaying.

Verse 10: *For a ten-acre vineyard will yield only six gallons, and 10 bushels of seed will yield only one bushel.*

Not only would grand homes lie empty, the land would become unproductive. A vineyard would yield only about three-fifths of a gallon of juice per acre. The harvest would be only one tenth as great as the amount of seed planted!

Verse 11: *Woe to those who rise early in the morning in pursuit of beer, who linger into the evening, inflamed by wine.*

Isaiah addressed his second woe again to self-centered, greedy, wealthy individuals. From dawn to late at night, they indulged their selfish desires. Their addiction to drinking indicated a deeper addiction to satisfying their own pleasures. Their lives revolved solely around themselves.

Verse 12: *At their feasts they have lyre, harp, tambourine, flute, and wine. They do not perceive the LORD'S actions, and they do not see the work of His hands.*

The wealthy enjoyed feasts complete with abundant food, music, and wine. Their selfishness and greed temporarily gratified their desires but dulled their spiritual sensitivity. They ignored the Lord's commands and other's needs. They also failed to perceive the Lord at work through His prophet.

Verse 13: *Therefore My people go into exile because they lack knowledge; the dignitaries are starving, and the masses are parched with thirst.*

The Lord called Isaiah's audience to have a personal relationship with Him. Since they refused to know Him personally, those who felt most secure would lose everything. Unfortunately, they would not suffer alone. Their disobedience would bring suffering to others, including those they had oppressed.

Verse 14: *Therefore Sheol enlarges its throat and opens wide its enormous jaws, and down go Zion's dignitaries, her masses, her crowds, and those who carouse in her!*

The wealthy, who always wanted more, would receive an appropriate punishment. *Sheol*, the realm of the dead, always had room for more. Not even the walls of Jerusalem could protect its inhabitants.

Pride had driven wealthy individuals on their quest for

self-gratification. That pride would lead to their fall. The ruins of their estates would clearly testify to the consequences of greed and pride and point people to the need to live according to the Lord's expectations of justice and righteousness (Isa. 5:15-17).

Isaiah concluded his series of woes by singling out four additional sins. First, he targeted those who reveled in sin and dared the Lord to punish them. Second, Isaiah condemned those who judged evil and good based on how they benefitted from the results. Third, he attacked those who believed themselves wiser than the Lord. Finally, he condemned those who instead of being heroes in dispensing justice preferred to be heroes at drinking and indulging selfish desires. The Lord's judgment would come with awful destruction (5:18-30).

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 8

ISAIAH 6:1-13

THE BACKGROUND

In the year when Judah's King Uzziah died, the Lord granted Isaiah a vision of His holiness and lordship. In the vision Isaiah saw the Lord enthroned with heavenly beings surrounding Him and proclaiming His holiness and glory. The chorus of voices shook the temple and smoke filled the structure. Although the earth is filled with the Lord's glory and testifies to His reality and presence, in this revelation Isaiah experienced the Lord's holiness in a powerful new way (Isa. 6:1-4).

In the presence of the Lord's holiness, Isaiah recognized his own sinfulness and the sinfulness of the society in which he lived. That knowledge initially led the prophet to a sense of despair (6:5).

However, the Lord in His grace provided forgiveness and cleansing. One of the heavenly beings took a glowing coal from the altar and touched the coal to Isaiah's lips, in accordance with the prophet's confession of possessing unclean lips (see 6:5). The heavenly being then announced Isaiah's wickedness had been removed and his sin atoned for (6:6-7).

The Lord then asked for a volunteer to serve Him. In awe of the Lord's holiness and gratitude for His forgiveness, Isaiah responded to the Lord's call. For the prophet, humble service was the appropriate way to honor the Lord (6:8).

The Lord explained Isaiah's assignment. The prophet would preach to a hardened people who would respond to the Lord's message by hardening themselves still more against Him. When Isaiah asked how long he should fill this ministry role, the Lord declared he should preach until judgment came, until no audience remained to hear the message. The destruction that came would appear so complete that Judah would seem to have no future. However, in His grace the Lord would preserve a remnant (6:9-13).

1. HOLINESS (ISA. 6:1-4)

Verse 1: *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and His robe filled the temple.*

King Uzziah [uh ZIGH uh] died in 740 B.C. after a 52-year reign. Uzziah had become king at age 16 and had proved himself both a capable administrator and military command-

er (2 Chron. 26:1-15). Unfortunately, Uzziah overstepped his authority and performed the duties of a priest, duties forbidden to him. The Lord's judgment fell on him in the form of leprosy, making him unclean and unfit to enter the temple or to be in contact with people. His son Jotham ruled with him until his death (2 Chron. 26:16-23).

The death of such an able leader hit the nation hard. For the most part, Uzziah had obeyed the Lord. Judah had prospered under him, enjoying safety and security. Most people probably wondered if Jotham would follow in his father's footsteps. The ascending of Tiglath-Pileser III [TIG lath-pih LEE zuhr] to power in Assyria in 745 B.C. with his desire to conquer and create an empire created additional concern.

As Isaiah pondered the fate of Judah following the death of Uzziah, he saw the true King seated on His throne. Isaiah apparently was in the temple when his vision occurred (Isa. 6:1). Evidently the veil had been removed and the prophet could see into the holy of holies of the temple. In the place of the ark of the covenant, Isaiah saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne.

Throughout the Old Testament, people acknowledged that to see the Lord brought death (Gen. 32:30; Judg. 13:22). Yet occasionally the Lord appeared to individuals to confirm His call and to offer encouragement (Gen. 16:11-14; Ex. 34:5-10). As Isaiah wondered about his people's future, the Lord appeared to encourage him. The earthly king had died, but the Heavenly King remained in control.

The words *high and lofty* describe the Lord's throne. As earthly thrones usually sat on raised platforms to indicate the authority and power of the one who sat on the throne, so the elevation of the Lord's throne signified the ultimate authority and power of the true King. The prophet's partial vision of the Lord's glory emphasized His ultimate authority and rule. Knowing the Lord remained in control, Isaiah and his people could cope with Uzziah's death.

Verse 2: *Seraphim were standing above Him; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.*

Various members of the Lord's heavenly host are mentioned throughout the Old Testament (cherubim in Gen. 3:24; sons of God in Job 1:6). Seraphim [SEHR uh fim] are referred to only in Isaiah 6 in the Bible. The letters *im* at the end of the term *seraphim* indicates the word is plural. The singular form is *seraph*. The root verb from which the term *seraphim* is derived means "to burn." Perhaps as they

praised the Lord, they burned or glowed with the reflection of His holiness and glory. The seraphim stood above the Lord. He remained seated on His throne, while they demonstrated readiness to praise and serve.

Each seraph had three pairs of wings. With one pair of wings each seraph covered his face. Even though the seraphim comprised part of the Lord's heavenly host, they covered their eyes shielding themselves from the Lord's overwhelming grandeur. The covering of the face denoted reverence. With a second pair of wings, each seraph covered his feet. The word *feet* sometimes was used to refer to a person's private parts, but perhaps a better interpretation focuses on the feet as instruments of mobility. By covering their feet the seraphim indicated their desire to allow the Lord to choose their direction. With a third pair of wings the seraphim flew. The form of the verb translated *flew* indicates intensive motion. The seraphim devotedly praised and served the Lord.

Verse 3: *And one called to another: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; His glory fills the whole earth.*

The seraphim sang back and forth to each other in praise to the Lord. The use of the word *holy* three times emphasized the Lord's otherness from His creation. The threefold repetition expressed the truth that the Lord is completely and absolutely holy. The seraphim also sang that the Lord's glory fills the entire earth. The beautiful world that sustains us physically, although marred by human sin, still reflects the Lord's glorious design of creation and provision for all creatures (see Ps. 19:1).

Verse 4: *The foundations of the doorways shook at the sound of their voices, and the temple was filled with smoke.*

The praise offered by the seraphim shook the foundations of the great temple doors. The smoke of fragrant incense, like the incense that burned on the altar of incense in the temple's holy place, filled the temple, further obscuring the Lord from Isaiah's sight and creating a full sensory experience of sight, sound, and smell.

Isaiah witnessed the Lord's holiness. The Lord sat on a lofty throne, raised above His creation and creatures by His power, authority, and perfection. Heavenly creatures surrounded Him, singing His praises and standing ready to do His will. The immensity of His robe and the smoke of incense obscured His face from human sight. Isaiah recognized the Lord as completely different from humanity. The Lord alone embodied moral perfection and total righteousness and

truth. He was transcendent above His creation.

2. DESPAIR (ISA. 6:5)

Verse 5: *Then I said: Woe is me, for I am ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts.*

The Lord's holiness made Isaiah painfully aware of his sinfulness. The prophet groaned in horror as he realized his uncleanness before the perfectly righteous and pure Lord. He referred to himself as *ruined*, a word that also may mean "silenced." Isaiah could say nothing in his defense. He could only confess his sinfulness.

The prophet described himself as a person of unclean lips, who lived among a people of unclean lips. Thus Isaiah identified himself as being guilty like all the other inhabitants of Judah. The term *unclean* typically described a person who had not maintained ritual purity or who had come into contact with something ritually unclean. Isaiah did not refer to ritual impurity here but rather to personal disobedience. Like his people, the prophet professed to having gone his own way (Isa. 53:6). One's lips represent the expression of one's life. Isaiah's words had demonstrated his character was not in keeping with the Lord's character. Rather than being different from his people, the prophet had behaved like them.

Isaiah realized a sinner like himself had no business being in the Lord's presence. He had seen too much of the Lord and experienced too much of His holiness. He was surely doomed! In his choice of the expression *woe*, the prophet utilized the language of lamentation and mourning, appropriate at times of death and disaster.

3. ATONEMENT (ISA. 6:6-7)

Verse 6: *Then one of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a glowing coal that he had taken from the altar with tongs.*

After confessing his lack of holiness and assuming his burden of sin had sealed his doom, Isaiah waited. He did not make excuses or try to blame his failures on his cultural environment. He apparently recognized he had chosen to sin. Isaiah did not try to make a deal with the Lord. He realized he had no claim to the Lord's grace and could offer nothing that would atone for his sinfulness.

Suddenly a seraph flew from its position above the Lord's

throne to the altar. Some Bible students suggest the seraph flew to the altar of incense. Others believe the seraph flew to the altar of sacrifice or burnt offerings. While either altar would have been connected to the Lord's holiness, the sacrificial altar would have particularly been connected to the Lord's forgiveness of sins.

In any case, the focus here is on the fire represented by the glowing coal. That coal indicated fire had engulfed or still burned on the altar. Fire can serve as a blessing or a curse. In the Old Testament fire symbolized the Lord's holy presence (Deut. 4:12) but also His judgment (Num. 11:1-3). The Lord could destroy with fire, but He could also purify through fire (Isa. 1:25). As the Lord would purify the nation, he acted to purify Isaiah.

Verse 7: *He touched my mouth with it and said: Now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, and your sin is atoned for.*

Using tongs for protection from the heat of the glowing coal, the seraph picked up a fiery coal from the altar and flew to Isaiah. Because the glowing coal came from the holy altar, it shared in the altar's and the Lord's holiness. Since Isaiah's unclean, unholy lips represented his sinfulness, the seraph touched the prophet's lips with the glowing coal. The Lord dealt with the sinfulness Isaiah had recognized and confessed.

The prophet experienced the Lord's forgiveness and cleansing. Isaiah did not offer an animal sacrifice or financial gift or make a significant vow to the Lord to secure forgiveness. He simply recognized his sinfulness and need for forgiveness and accepted the Lord's gift.

4. CALL (ISA. 6:8)

Verse 8: *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying: Who should I send? Who will go for Us? I said: Here I am. Send me.*

Having dealt with Isaiah's sinfulness, the Lord indicated the need for someone to deliver His message to sinful people. Bible students have suggested various interpretations of the word *Us*. Some believe the Lord included His heavenly court with Himself in the designation. Others have suggested the plural pronoun reflects a plural used by royalty in proclamations, for example, "after much consideration we have decided" although the king himself ordered the decision. Probably, *Us* refers to the Trinity. While Isaiah would not have had the knowledge of the Trinity believers now have, he certainly looked ahead to One who would come

as the Lord's unique Servant (Isa. 7:14; 52:13-53:12) and understood something of the work of the Lord's Spirit (Isa. 11:2; 61:1).

As soon as the Lord had spoken, Isaiah volunteered to serve, not out of a sense of guilt or obligation to repay the Lord but from a heart overflowing with gratitude for the cleansing he enjoyed.

5. ASSIGNMENT (ISA. 6:9-13)

Verse 9: *And He replied: Go! Say to these people: Keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking, but do not perceive.*

The Lord called Isaiah to a difficult task. He was preparing His prophet for a difficult ministry. The Lord wanted the prophet to proclaim His message with the understanding that He could expect little positive response. The word *listen* implies obedience as well as comprehension. Listening to a warning regarding an approaching army needed to result in grabbing a weapon and rushing to the defense of one's family and community. Listening to the Lord's command needed to result in obedience to His command (see Deut. 6:1-3). However, when Isaiah preached, the people would listen to his words but refuse to accept the Lord's call to an obedient life.

Verses 9-10 express the results the Lord knew would come, not the results He desired. The Lord did not instruct Isaiah to make His message unclear so people would not understand. He did not command Isaiah to mumble or to use bad illustrations or big words that would confuse the people. He wanted Isaiah to speak clearly and forcefully and yet with the knowledge that people who had rejected His message time and again would continue to do so.

Verse 10: *Dull the minds of these people; deafen their ears and blind their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their minds, turn back, and be healed.*

The language of verses 9-10 reminds us of language used in other instances in the Old Testament where the Lord brought judgment. For example, the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh experienced the devastation of ten plagues before He finally acknowledged the Lord's power and sovereignty (Ex. 4:21; 10:1; 11:1). However, the Scriptures also record that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex. 8:32). The Lord exercises ultimate control over His creation. For centuries He had reached out to His people, sending prophets to

call them back to Him. His people, however, had continually rejected the Lord's call and disobeyed Him. Just as the time for judgment came for Pharaoh, so the time of judgment had come for God's people in the eighth century B.C.

The Lord did not desire to punish His people. Our God desires to save, not to destroy (Ezek. 33:11; 2 Pet. 3:9). The Lord allows humans to choose obedience or disobedience, life or death. Israel had consistently chosen disobedience and death, and the Lord knew they would continue to do so (see John 3:19). In His amazing grace He sent Isaiah as yet another prophet to call His people back to Him even though He knew Isaiah's words would not be heeded. As Pharaoh hardened his heart against the Lord bringing destruction upon his nation, so the Lord knew the people of Judah would harden their hearts bringing judgment upon themselves.

Verse 11: *Then I said, "Until when, Lord?" And He replied: Until cities lie in ruins without inhabitants, houses are without people, the land is ruined and desolate,*

The prophet asked the Lord how long he would have to exercise this unfruitful ministry. The Lord instructed Isaiah to faithfully preach until none remained to hear. The Lord's judgment for His people's centuries of sin and disobedience would result in an empty wilderness that would not sustain life.

Verse 12: *and the LORD drives the people far away, leaving great emptiness in the land.*

The people's consistent failure to acknowledge the Lord and follow His ways would lead to the nation's judgment. They had chosen the way leading to death rather than to life. The Lord did not tell Isaiah exactly when the destruction would occur, only that it would surely come. The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in 722 B.C. during Isaiah's ministry. Isaiah's nation, the Southern Kingdom of Judah, fell in 587 B.C.

Verse 13: *Though a tenth will remain in the land, it will be burned again. Like the terebinth or the oak, which leaves a stump when felled, the holy seed is the stump.*

The Lord ended His commissioning of Isaiah with a ray of hope. The coming judgment would result in horrible destruction of land and people. Devastation would pursue them until in place of the great tree planted by the Lord, only a stump would remain. Yet from the stump a new tree could and would grow. Destruction and death did not constitute the Lord's final words although judgment had to come before the Lord's next words could be spoken. The Lord's faithful-

ness to His promises provided His people with strong hope for new life.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 15

ISAIAH 7:1–23:18

THE BACKGROUND

Ahaz [AY haz] became king of Judah about the time Aram [A (a) ruh], also known as Syria, and the Northern Kingdom of Israel were attempting to force Judah into an alliance against Assyria [uh SIHR ih uh]. As Ahaz evaluated his options, Isaiah encouraged trust in the Lord. The prophet declared that Aram and Israel's plans would fail and both nations would suffer destruction by Assyria. When Isaiah invited Ahaz to ask the Lord for a sign to confirm the Lord was powerful enough to protect Ahaz from his enemies, the king refused. Isaiah announced the Lord would provide a sign anyway. A virgin would conceive and give birth to a son named Immanuel [ih MAN yoo el]. Before the child was old enough to know right from wrong, Aram and Israel would no longer constitute a threat (Isa. 7:1-16).

The Lord declared judgment was coming on Aram, Israel, and Judah. The Lord would use Assyria to punish His people for trusting in military might and political alliances rather than in Him (7:17–8:22).

While the Lord would use Assyria to judge His people, He would not give up on them. A child would be born into the house of David and become the perfect, righteous ruler. He would lead the Lord's people to act righteously and depend solely on the Lord. The Lord would bring a remnant of His people back to their land, and they would look to Him alone for salvation and life (9:1–12:6). Prophecies in Isaiah 9 and 11, as well as in Isaiah 7:14, were ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

The Lord was not only the God of Israel and Judah but also sovereign over all nations. Chapters 13–23 of Isaiah record the Lord's words of judgment against nations that had trusted in their advanced culture, great wealth, military power, and false gods to secure their future. These nations had attributed their success to their own ability and gods rather than to the Lord. The Lord would punish their arrogance. Isaiah encouraged the people of Judah to place their trust in the Lord alone (13:1–23:18).

1. GOOD NEWS (ISA. 7:1-16)

Verse 1: *This took place during the reign of Ahaz, son of Jotham, son of Uzziah king of Judah: Rezin king of Aram,*

along with Pekah, son of Remaliah, king of Israel, waged war against Jerusalem, but he could not succeed.

After becoming king of Judah in 735 B.C. following the death of his father Jotham [JOH thuhm], Ahaz encountered an immediate, serious threat. The great Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III [TIG lath-pih LEE zuhr] had come to power in 745 B.C. and had immediately begun to establish his authority over neighboring lands. In 743 B.C. planning to add the nations there to his growing empire, he moved into biblical Palestine. Tiglath-Pileser III forced Aram and Israel, as well as other peoples to recognize his authority by paying tribute.

While events elsewhere in his empire required Tiglath-Pileser's attention, Rezin [REE zin], king of Aram, began assembling an alliance against Assyria. The Northern Kingdom of Israel under Pekah [PEE kuh], the son of Remaliah [rem uh LIGH uh], joined as did the Philistines and perhaps a few other small kingdoms. Following Ahaz's refusal to join the alliance, Rezin and Pekah joined forces to attack Judah, remove Ahaz as king, and set up a king sympathetic to their cause. When Rezin and Pekah's armies moved into Judah, Philistia and Edom took advantage of the invasion to conquer Judean towns along their borders. The situation looked bleak for Ahaz and Judah, but Rezin and Pekah's plan against Jerusalem could not succeed. The Lord would not allow it to do so.

Verse 2: *When it became known to the house of David that Aram had occupied Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the hearts of his people trembled like trees of a forest shaking in a wind.*

As the most important tribe in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the designation Ephraim [EE fra ihm] often was used to refer to all of Israel. When news reached Ahaz that Rezin occupied Ephraim, Ahaz responded not in faith, but in fear. As the current ruler from the house or line of David, Ahaz's actions needed to reflect faithful obedience to the Lord so the Davidic dynasty and Judah could flourish. Instead of remembering how the Lord had saved His people throughout their history and trusting Him, Ahaz allowed fear to lead him to make desperate, bad decisions.

Verse 3: *Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out with your son Shear-jashub to meet Ahaz at the end of the conduit of the upper pool, by the road to the Fuller's Field.*

The Lord directed Isaiah to take his son Shear-jashub [SHEE ahr-JAY shuhb] and meet Ahaz on his inspection tour of Jerusalem's water supply. Faced with the threat of inva-

sion, the king inspected Jerusalem's water supply in preparation for the anticipated siege of Jerusalem. Access to water proved crucial in withstanding a siege. Without a continuous supply of water, a city would be forced to surrender in a matter of days. While Bible students are uncertain about the precise location of the pool, it probably lay near the Gihon Spring in the Kidron Valley to the northeast of the city. An aqueduct carried water from that pool into another pool inside the south wall where the inhabitants could have safe access.

The Lord sometimes instructed prophets to give their children names that emphasized His message to His people (see Isa. 8:3-4; Hos. 1:3-9). Shear-jashub's name meant "a remnant will return" and carried both a negative and positive meaning for the Lord's people. Negatively, Shear-jashub's name indicated the coming destruction would be so devastating that only a remnant would remain. Positively, Shear-jashub's name indicated a remnant of the Lord's people would be preserved. They would not all be totally destroyed.

Verse 4: *Say to him: Calm down and be quiet. Don't be afraid or fainthearted because of these two smoldering stubs of firebrands, Rezin of Aram, and the son of Remaliah.*

Isaiah told Ahaz he had nothing to fear from Aram and Israel. While they considered themselves raging fires ready to consume Judah, they really comprised the dying embers of a small fire. As Isaiah spoke about the Northern Kingdom of Israel, he referred to its King Pekah as the son of Remaliah. Because Pekah constituted such an insignificant threat, his name did not warrant mention. Ahaz needed to have calm confidence in the Lord. Inviting Assyria's intervention would only spell disaster for Judah and draw the nation more strongly under Assyrian domination. Ahaz needed to wait patiently in faith for the Lord to act.

Verse 5: *For Aram, along with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah, has plotted harm against you. They say:*

Isaiah admitted Ahaz faced an imminent, serious threat. Aram and Ephraim meant to harm him personally and place Judah under their control. Ahaz had reason to be concerned, but he needed to trust the Lord to act rather than attempt to resolve the problem through political alliance.

Verse 6: *Let us go up against Judah, terrorize it, and conquer it for ourselves. Then we can install Tabeel's son as king in it."*

Because Ahaz refused to join Aram and Israel's alliance

against Assyria, the two nations intended to conquer Judah and install Tabeel's son as Judah's king. Nothing is known of Tabeel [TAB ih uhl], but his Aramaic name suggests he had contacts with Aram and would have been sympathetic to Aram and Israel's cause. Tabeel had no relationship to David's line and did not worship the Lord. His son might serve as an effective puppet king, but he would have no legitimate claim to the throne. His potential reign would run counter to the Lord's promise to keep a son of David on the throne of Judah (see 2 Sam. 7).

Verse 7: *This is what the Lord GOD says: It will not happen; it will not occur.*

Speaking as the Lord's messenger, Isaiah clearly stated Aram and Israel's plans would fail. Their small alliance could not withstand Assyria nor would the Lord allow them to conquer Jerusalem. Ahaz had no need to fear.

Verse 8: *The head of Aram is Damascus, the head of Damascus is Rezin (within 65 years Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people),*

Isaiah put the actions of Aram and Israel in perspective. Damascus served as Aram's capital, the head city in the nation. Rezin served as head of state in Damascus. Aram's actions were based on Rezin's ideas. When Rezin fell, Aram would cease to constitute a threat. As Aram was destined to fall, so would Ephraim. If Aram and Israel's attack occurred roughly in 735/734 B.C., the 65 years would end in approximately 670 B.C. About 670 B.C. the Assyrian king Esarhaddon [EE sahr-HAD uhn] settled non-Israelites in the old Northern Kingdom of Israel, also known as Ephraim. The settlement of non-Israelites in that area coupled with the earlier deportations of Israelites from the land shattered Israel's or Ephraim's national identity and political power (see Ezra 4:1-2).

Verse 9: *the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you do not stand firm in your faith, then you will not stand at all.*

Just as Rezin bore responsibility for Aram's actions, so Pekah bore responsibility for Ephraim's actions. When both kings fell, neither nation would pose a threat to Judah. Based on complete confidence in the Lord, Isaiah counseled Ahaz to stand firm. The pronoun *you* is plural in the original Hebrew language and probably implied Ahaz needed to set the example of faith in the Lord for his royal court and his nation to follow. The Hebrew of the second part of the verse provides a brilliant wordplay on the verb *stand* that is evi-

dent in the translation: If you do not stand firm in your faith, then you will not stand at all. Ahaz faced an important decision. He could live in a perpetually panicked state of constantly trying to find security in his own plans and those of pagan nations or he could trust the Lord to guide and save His people.

Verse 10: *Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz:*

The Lord spoke to Ahaz again through Isaiah. Some Bible students believe these words introduce a meeting with Ahaz that occurred several days or weeks after the prophet's initial meeting with the king. However, because no evidence exists to support a change in time and location, it seems best to understand the following verses as a continuation of the initial conversation with Ahaz. Through His prophet, the Lord continued to urge Ahaz to trust Him.

Verse 11: *"Ask for a sign from the LORD your God—from the depths of Sheol to the heights of heaven."*

The Lord wanted so much for Ahaz to trust Him and set an example of faith, He offered to provide Ahaz a sign to assure him He would act to save Judah. The Lord did not often provide signs, probably because He did not and does not want His people's faith to depend on physical signs. We need to recognize His work in history and His presence and guidance in our lives without demanding additional signs. Occasionally the Lord does provide signs to confirm or strengthen faith (see Judg. 6:36-40; 1 Sam. 10:1-9). In His graciousness, the Lord offered to give Ahaz a sign to encourage him to have faith.

Isaiah invited Ahaz to ask a sign from the LORD your God. The Lord was no stranger to Ahaz. The Lord had bound Himself to David and his descendants in covenant loyalty (2 Sam. 7:11b-16). Both Ahaz's grandfather Uzziah [uh ZIGH uh] and father Jotham had followed the Lord (2 Kings 15:32-34). Ahaz apparently had little personal faith in the Lord (see 2 Kings 16:1-4). The Lord and His prophet wanted the king to know and trust the Lord. To encourage Ahaz, the Lord placed no limits on the sign he could ask. Ahaz could seek a sign from the depths of Sheol [SHEE oh] to the heights of heaven or anything in between.

Verse 12: *But Ahaz replied, "I will not ask. I will not test the LORD."*

Ahaz refused the Lord's offer of a sign, referring to Deuteronomy 6:16. In Deuteronomy 6:16 Moses warned Israel not to test the Lord out of rebellion as they had done at Massah [MASS uh] when they complained about the lack of water

and doubted the Lord could provide (see Ex. 17:1-7). However, the Lord did sometimes invite His people to test Him to strengthen their faith (see Mal. 3:10) and expected them to accept His invitation and see His power and the truth of His promises. When Ahaz refused the Lord's offer to provide a sign, he demonstrated not pious faith, but rather his unbelief and decision to trust in human power and solutions rather than in the Lord.

Verse 13: *Isaiah said, "Listen, house of David! Is it not enough for you to try the patience of men? Will you also try the patience of my God?"*

Isaiah saw through Ahaz's false piety and condemned not just Ahaz, but the house of David, perhaps a reference to the royal court as indicated by the use of the plural pronoun *you* in the original language. The Lord had reached the point He would tolerate no more.

Verse 14: *Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel.*

Ahaz had tried the Lord's patience by refusing to trust Him and rejecting His offer of a sign. However, the Lord refused to allow Ahaz's unfaithful actions to doom His people or to prevent them from perceiving His truth and salvation. The Lord declared He would give Ahaz a sign anyway to encourage him and the nation to trust Him.

Isaiah declared that a virgin would conceive. The Hebrew term translated *virgin* in Isaiah 7:14, literally meaning "young woman of marriageable age," also was used to designate a virgin. Virtually all Bible scholars believe the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 refers to the birth of Jesus by the virgin Mary. Some hold that Isaiah had the Messiah and only Him in mind. Others think the prophecy had an initial application in Isaiah's time and an ultimate fulfillment at Jesus' birth.

Bible students who believe Isaiah's prophecy had an initial application in Isaiah's time before it was ultimately fulfilled in Christ hold that Isaiah used the word *virgin* in reference to a young woman who at the time of his prophecy was an unmarried virgin. This young woman soon would marry, conceive in the normal way, and give birth to a son. Before that child would be old enough to know right from wrong, the threat King Ahaz faced from Israel and Aram would have passed (Isa. 7:16). The birth of a son named Immanuel and the subsequent end of Aram and Israel's threat would have clearly demonstrated the Lord's power to Ahaz, condemned his lack of faith, and challenged him to believe.

The Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to reveal that the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 was the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ to the virgin Mary (Matt. 1:23). When Matthew quoted Isaiah's prophecy, he used a Greek word that specifically means "virgin." Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. There was no human father. Isaiah's prophecy was finally and completely fulfilled by the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 16: *For before the boy knows to reject what is bad and choose what is good, the land of the two kings you dread will be abandoned.*

The son's birth constituted only part of the sign to Ahaz. Bible students offer differing interpretations for the phrase *reject what is bad and choose what is good*. Some suggest it refers to a child distinguishing between what is harmful and what is helpful. Others think the phrase denotes moral discrimination.

Before the child could reject evil and choose good, the lands of Aram and Israel would be abandoned. Within three years of Isaiah's prophecy to Ahaz, the Assyrian army had destroyed Aram's capital Damascus (732 B.C.). Assyria destroyed the Israelite capital Samaria approximately 10 years later (722 B.C.), thereby bringing an end to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Thus, by the time the son began his transition to responsible adulthood, Aram and Israel no longer posed a threat to Judah.

2. BAD NEWS (ISA. 7:17–8:22)

The people of Judah would eventually pay the price for their lack of faith in the Lord. The Lord would use the Assyrians as His instrument of judgment (7:17). The devastation is described in Isaiah 7:18-25.

Isaiah's wife had a son whom Isaiah was instructed to name Maher-shalal-hash-baz [MAY hehr-SHAL al-HASH-baz], a name meaning "speeding to the plunder, hurrying to the spoil"), as a sign to Judah. However, judgment would not be the Lord's final word. After He had used Assyria to punish His people, He would be with His people again to save them (8:1-10). The prophet wondered why the Lord's people followed pagan practices rather than consulting the living God. Their failure to trust the Lord would lead to their destruction (8:11-22).

3. PERSISTENT HOPE (ISA. 9:1–12:6)

Isaiah saw a new future beyond the Lord's judgment of Israel

and Judah. A new day would dawn for the Lord's people with the birth of a Child who would seek justice and righteousness and whose reign would never end, a messianic prophecy fulfilled in Jesus Christ (9:1-7).

Isaiah prophesied coming disaster. The people had become a selfish people who sought their own good while caring nothing about others. Yet after judgment a faithful remnant would return. The Lord would again demonstrate His love for His people. He would judge Assyria (9:8–10:34).

Isaiah 11:1-9 introduces another great messianic passage. The messianic King would rule with righteousness, dispensing justice in a peaceful, perfect world. The Lord's people would witness to others of His power, holiness, chastening, and salvation (11:1–12:6).

4. ACCOUNTABLE NATIONS (ISA. 13:1–23:18)

As the Lord of all, God would judge the sin of all nations. The Lord would destroy Babylon because of its arrogance. Assyria also would fall (13:1–14:27). Additionally Judah's neighbors would experience the Lord's judgment. Philistia, Israel's longtime enemy, would fall. Moab, a nation related but sometimes antagonistic to Israel, would suffer devastation. Aram's capital Damascus would fall and the Northern Kingdom of Israel would be destroyed (14:28–17:14).

The Lord continued to deliver messages against the nations. The Lord commanded Isaiah to go naked and barefoot for three years as a sign that Assyria would conquer Egypt and Cush. Judah would be foolish to trust in these nations instead of trusting in the Lord (18:1–20:6).

After further words of judgment against Babylon and oracles against Dumah and Arabia, the Lord addressed His people. Their sin also would lead to their punishment. The Lord's final message of judgment targeted Tyre, a prominent commercial city.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 22

ISAIAH 24:1–35:10

THE BACKGROUND

The Lord's message of judgment through His prophet against individual nations reaches a climax in Isaiah 24:1–27:13. This passage describes the Lord's judgment on a universal scale and the establishment of His worldwide rule. In that day the Lord's people would celebrate His kingship and experience restoration.

Although the Northern Kingdom and other nations also would experience judgment, the focus of Isaiah 28:1–35:10 falls on the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The people of Judah's lack of faith, empty worship, and dependence on their own schemes would lead to horrible punishment. The nation would be shattered, but the Lord would restore His people following judgment. Ultimately, the Lord's people would live in security and their enemies would be destroyed (28:1–35:10). Isaiah 32:1 introduces another great messianic passage regarding a king who will reign in righteousness, a prophecy that is fulfilled in Christ.

1. JUDGMENT AND DELIVERANCE (ISA. 24:1–27:13)

Many Bible students have identified Isaiah 24:1–27:13 as the Apocalypse of Isaiah since the chapters focus on the Lord's final, universal triumph. Isaiah identified Yahweh as the Lord of all nations and of the earth itself. He would judge all opposed to Him but also restore His people. The message should have encouraged the Lord's people to recognize His lordship and look to Him for security and salvation rather than to the might of other nations.

After speaking the Lord's words of judgment against specific nations in chapters 13–23, Isaiah prophesied the Lord's judgment of the entire earth in chapter 24. Human sin had sentenced the entire world to a destruction from which no social or economic class would be immune. Wealthy and powerful individuals would suffer just as would the poorest people. The Lord's judgment on Israel and Judah for failing to obey Him also would fall on all nations who refused to acknowledge and obey Him. In that future day the Lord would defeat all heavenly and earthly opposition to Him and establish His rule on Mount Zion in Jerusalem (Isa. 24:1–23).

Following the Lord's judgment, His people would respond with a grateful hymn in celebration of His deliverance of

them from their enemies. The Lord would destroy those who arrogantly trusted in their own power and schemes. Using Judah's neighbor Moab as an example of nations that reject Him, the Lord declared that rejection of Him would lead to destruction. In contrast His people would experience abundant life. The curse of death would be eliminated forever (25:1–12).

Living in the Lord's new world would require trust in and faithful obedience to Him. Yet, as Isaiah spoke the Lord's words to the inhabitants of Judah, the people continued to disobey the Lord and enemies continued to threaten. The people could not by their own power protect themselves or bring in the new reality. Salvation depended solely on the Lord. While the Lord's people waited for His deliverance, they needed to confidently trust that He who would bring salvation in the future remained active and trustworthy in the present. The prophet's words assured the people that the Lord was aware of their situation and was not defeated by it, but they needed to steadfastly trust in Him. Isaiah used the imagery of the monster Leviathan, who appears to be a wild sea serpent, to represent the chaotic forces of sin and death (see also Job 41:1–34; Ps. 74:13–14). The prophet stated clearly sin and death did not and would not prevail. The Lord would defeat sin and death, and those who remained faithful to Him would share His triumph (Isa. 26:1–27:1).

Isaiah had described Israel and Judah as the Lord's unproductive vineyard (see 5:1–7), but beyond judgment the Lord would again lovingly tend and protect His vineyard. The Lord would bring His purified people back to the promised land so they could worship Him in spirit and truth (27:2–13).

The Lord does not judge because He enjoys punishing and destroying. The Lord delays His judgment as long as possible, thus giving people every opportunity to repent. He desires that people recognize Him as Lord and experience His salvation (2 Pet. 3:9).

2. WOE AND HOPE (ISA. 28:1–33:24)

These chapters, which consist of some pronouncements of woe also contain words of hope. Though the passage begins with condemnation of Samaria or the Northern Kingdom, its focus was on Judah. Judah needed to reject the example of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and refuse to depend on foreign alliances. Such dependence would lead to downfall. Israel's leaders ignored the Lord, engaged in carousing and revelry, and shirked their responsibility of guiding and

teaching their people. When the true prophets spoke, their message was mocked. Having refused to obey the Lord's commands, the people would find themselves subservient to Assyrian masters (28:1–13).

Judah's leaders acted as foolishly as had Israel's in rejecting the Lord's call to repentance and faith. Their refusal to trust the Lord and their decision to rely on foreign alliances would lead to their nation's death. However, the Lord had placed in Zion a stone that would provide a sure foundation for those who trusted Him. The Holy Spirit inspired Peter to recognize Christ as that cornerstone and sure foundation (Isa. 28:14–22; see 1 Pet. 2:6).

Farmers planted and harvested according to principles they learned from the Lord. They knew when to plow, when to sow, and what methods to use for harvesting particular crops. In contrast, however, Judah's leaders had not learned the Lord's wisdom. If they did not follow the Lord's will, Judah's unfaithful leaders would lead their nation to destruction (Isa. 28:23–29:12).

Chapter 29. Verse 13: *The Lord said: Because these people approach Me with their mouths to honor Me with lip-service—yet their hearts are far from Me, and their worship consists of man-made rules learned by rote —*

The Lord referred to the inhabitants of Judah and specifically to those in Jerusalem as *these people*, usually a negative title indicating the people's distance from Him (see Isa. 6:10). Worshipers filled the Jerusalem temple offering prayers and sacrifices to the Lord, but their worship consisted only of empty words and ritual. In daily life they ignored Him and His commandments.

Isaiah pointed out the roots of the people's meaningless worship. First, the people did not know the Lord and thus had no real reverence for Him. True worship occurs when the Lord's people recognize His lordship and holiness, their unworthiness and dependence, and respond with sincere and loving devotion in worship and life. The people of Judah treated the Lord as immaterial to life and thus their worship was routine rather than real.

Second, the people had reduced a dynamic relationship with the Lord to keeping man-made rules. Like the Pharisees in New Testament times who carefully tithed everything and made sure they did not walk too far on the Sabbath but cared little for people's needs, the people of Judah focused on ritual rather than on living daily as the Lord's people. Unconcerned about justice and righteousness, they believed

keeping their rules and routine constituted the whole duty of following the Lord.

Verse 14: *therefore I will again confound these people with wonder after wonder. The wisdom of their wise men will vanish, and the understanding of the perceptive will be hidden.*

The Lord had worked wonderful miracles in His people's past. He had miraculously given a son to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. He had brought His people out of slavery in Egypt. Such acts demonstrated His holiness and power so His people would confidently believe and follow Him. The Lord would act again to demonstrate His holiness and power, but this time He would act in judgment. The intent was to discipline a people who had become self-sufficient. The Lord wanted to bring His people to repentance. Desiring they turn to Him for wisdom and guidance, the Lord would create a vacuum of human wisdom in the land.

All rulers and leaders have advisors whose wisdom they trust. The advisors for Judah's kings gave advice based on their knowledge of military and political power. They refused to rely on the Lord in their attempts to ensure Judah's security. The Lord's coming judgment would demonstrate how little they knew. Their wisdom would prove foolishness.

Verse 15: *Woe to those who go to great lengths to hide their plans from the LORD. They do their works in darkness, and say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"*

Judah's leaders risked the future of their nation by making decisions based on human wisdom and desire rather than on the Lord's will. Foolishly deceiving themselves into thinking the Lord would not hear their deliberations and discover their plans, they met secretly in dark rooms. Their actions indicated they recognized their plans were not consistent with the Lord's will.

Verse 16: *You have turned things around, as if the potter were the same as the clay. How can what is made say about its maker, "He didn't make me"? How can what is formed say about the one who formed it, "He doesn't understand what he's doing"?*

In their perversity of thinking, the leaders had completely reversed the true relationship between the Lord and humanity. Using the imagery of a clay pot and potter, Isaiah pointed out the absurdity of a pot claiming to have made itself or ordering the potter to remake it because the potter did not seem to possess enough skill to make the vessel correctly in the first place.

Judah's arrogant leaders believed they possessed knowl-

edge and understanding superior to that of the Lord and could decide the fate of their nation better than He could. They offered the typical complaint that the Lord did not understand them or their situation. Yet the Lord had created them and their nation. He knew their situation and continuously offered guidance to them because He cared for them. Following His will constituted the way to life. Following human plans comprised the way to death. People who deny God's lordship and make their own plans will experience the Lord's judgment and discipline.

While judgment would fall on Judah for its sins, the Lord would ultimately restore His people. The deaf would hear and the blind would see both physically and spiritually. Justice would rule. The Lord's people would respond in faith and obedience and glorify the Lord. Since the Lord would accomplish Judah's future restoration, the people could trust Him to bring them through difficult times in the present (Isa. 29:17-24).

Chapter 30. Verse 1: *Woe to the rebellious children! This is the LORD's declaration. They carry out a plan, but not Mine, They make an alliance, but against My will, piling sin on top of sin.*

Most Bible students agree Isaiah's words apply to the situation in Judah from 704-701 B.C. Following the death of the powerful Assyrian king Sargon, rebellions broke out across the Assyrian Empire. Judah led an alliance of smaller nations and looked to Egypt for protection. The new Assyrian king, Sennacherib [suh NAK uh rib], quickly dealt with a rebellion that had broken out in southern Mesopotamia and then moved to reestablish control over biblical Palestine. That Isaiah did not specifically fault Judah's King Hezekiah for depending on Egypt may indicate Hezekiah's advisors forced him into the alliance. Judah's dependence on Egypt would lead to shameful consequences; Egypt was too weak to defeat the superior Assyrian army.

The Lord called His people *rebellious children*. He had instructed children of all ages to respect and obey their parents (Ex. 20:12), but the people of Judah had ignored the Lord, their Father. After the Lord brought His people out of Egypt, He had specifically commanded them never to ally themselves with Egypt (Deut. 17:16). Judah's direct disobedience indicated the people's lack of reverence for the Lord and their determination to follow their own will rather than His.

The Lord accused His people of piling sin on top of sin. Bi-

ble students have suggested three ways to understand this accusation. Some suggest the phrase referred to Judah's alliance with Egypt that was added on top of the sin of Judah's earlier alliance with Assyria under Ahaz. Others believe Judah's sin of alliance with Egypt became compounded with the leaders' effort to hide their actions. The sin of concealment was added to the sin of alliance (see Isa. 29:15). Still others think Judah's refusal to seek the Lord's will led to the additional sin of relying on human wisdom and strength. All the interpretations emphasize Judah's initial disobedience led quickly and easily to further acts of rebellion and sin.

Verse 2: *They set out to go down to Egypt without asking My advice, in order to seek shelter under Pharaoh's protection and take refuge in Egypt's shadow.*

The Lord condemned His people for making an alliance without seeking His will. They should have remembered how trusting the Lord had brought salvation in the past. Such recollection should have motivated them to trust the Lord in the present crisis. They should have asked the priests to seek the Lord's will, listened to the Lord's counsel, and trusted the Lord to lead them through difficult circumstances. They also should have listened to the Lord's message through His prophet. The decision-makers of Judah, however, refused to seek the Lord's will. Knowing that what the Lord expected would contradict their plans, they did not want to consult Him.

The people of Judah had abandoned the Lord as their shelter and refuge (see Ps. 61:4; Isa. 25:4) and looked instead to Egypt's military power for protection and security. Instead of looking to the living God, they looked to Egypt, a place of death (see Ex. 1:22).

Verse 3: *But Pharaoh's protection will become your shame, and refuge in Egypt's shadow your disgrace.*

Having exchanged trust in the Lord for trust in Egypt, Judah also exchanged the Lord's protection and guidance for disaster and shame. Egypt no longer constituted a world power. The pharaoh at that time was a Nubian [NYOO bih uhn], not an Egyptian. Egypt could not produce its own leaders much less defend any other nation.

The Lord condemned trust in Egypt by stating Judah would pay Egypt for protection but receive nothing. The leaders and people instructed the Lord's messengers to be silent because they did not want to obey the Lord's instruction. Their rejection of the Lord's message would result in Judah's becoming like a pottery vessel so smashed that no useful

fragments remain (Isa. 30:4-14).

Verse 15: *For the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said: "You will be delivered by returning and resting; your strength will lie in quiet confidence. But you are not willing."*

Judah believed its survival depended on Egypt's military strength when in reality only the Lord could provide life. Instead of frantic activity and foolish alliances, Judah's leaders and people needed to understand their weakness and depend on the Lord for security. If they turned to the Lord, they could rest in Him in faith that He would provide strength to meet and negotiate life's challenges. Unfortunately the people refused to let go of the fantasy that they controlled their future.

Verse 16: *You say, "No! We will escape on horses"—therefore you will escape!—and, "We will ride on fast horses"—but those who pursue you will be faster.*

Judah chose to depend on Egypt to protect it from Assyria. Unfortunately, Egypt's military could not save Judah. The very means of deliverance on which Judah wanted to depend (horses) would be successfully used against it.

Verse 17: *One thousand will flee at the threat of one, at the threat of five you will flee, until you alone remain like a solitary pole on a mountaintop or a banner on a hill.*

The Lord had promised His people that if they remained faithful, a handful of soldiers would put many to flight (Lev. 26:8). Since they had turned from the Lord, however, the opposite would occur. In 701 B.C., Sennacherib, king of Assyria, invaded Judah and destroyed every fortified town except Jerusalem.

Verse 18: *Therefore the LORD is waiting to show you mercy, and is rising up to show you compassion, for the LORD is a just God. Happy are all who wait patiently for Him.*

Isaiah 30:18 actually introduces a new section discussing the Lord's waiting to show mercy to Israel (30:18-26), but the verse also complements Isaiah's earlier encouragement to trust calmly and confidently in the Lord (Isa. 30:15). Since Judah's actions indicated they had no desire to wait on the Lord, the Lord determined to wait for them until, following their judgment, they recognized their helplessness and turned to Him. As the just Lord, He would punish sin to demonstrate the serious nature and consequences of disobedience, but He would then act with mercy and compassion toward His people.

In the future the Lord would no longer delay His actions but would actively, visibly work among His people (Isa.

30:19-26). Judah had depended on military might, but the Lord needed no army to defeat the Assyrians. If Judah could recognize the Lord's majesty, they would trust Him more readily (30:27-33). Isaiah again pronounced doom on those who trusted Egypt for protection. The prophet encouraged his people to repent, abandon trust in idols, and expect the Lord's victory (31:1-9).

Isaiah looked ahead to the righteous kingdom the Lord would establish (32:1-20). The prophet pointed his people to a future time when the Lord would deliver them from their enemies. The people would experience security and forgiveness under the divine King's rule (33:1-24).

3. END AND BEGINNING (ISA. 34:1-35:10)

Isaiah returned to the theme of the Lord's judgment on the nations (see 13:1-23; 18). The nations' judgment is certain because the Lord's word testifies to His power and reliability (34:1-17). Finally, the Lord would bring His redeemed people home. They would joyously enter Jerusalem, singing the Lord's praises (35:1-10). The Lord wanted Judah to know His plans for the future so they would understand sin's consequences and His plans to save and restore them. Knowing the Lord's ultimate plans for us also gives us confidence to trust Him and seek His will.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 29

ISAIAH 36:1–39:8

THE BACKGROUND

The Background Passage for this lesson, Isaiah 36:1–39:8, focuses on three significant events during the reign of King Hezekiah [[HEZ ih kigh uh] of Judah (715-686 B.C.). The first event was the Assyrian King Sennacherib's [suh NAK uh rib's] threat against Jerusalem in 701 B.C., often referred to as the Sennacherib Crisis. Sennacherib, king of Assyria, sent a top official and army to Jerusalem in an attempt to convince Hezekiah to surrender and thereby avoid a long, deadly siege of the city. The official, speaking on behalf of the Assyrian king, ridiculed Judah's trust that anyone, including the Lord, could deliver Judah from the power of the Assyrian king. Furthermore, the official suggested the Lord had sent Assyria to destroy Judah.

When Hezekiah received the message, he expressed grief, went to the temple, and sent for Isaiah. Isaiah instructed King Hezekiah not to fear because the Lord would defend Jerusalem and force Sennacherib to return home where he would die. After Hezekiah prayed to the Lord, Isaiah again prophesied Sennacherib's defeat and Jerusalem's deliverance. After the angel of the Lord miraculously struck down 185,000 in the Assyrian army camp, Sennacherib returned home where two of his own sons assassinated him (Isa. 36:1–37:38).

The second event concerned a time when illness threatened Hezekiah's life. When Isaiah announced to Hezekiah that the king would soon die, Hezekiah wept and prayed. The Lord granted Hezekiah 15 additional years of life, promised to defend Jerusalem, and gave Hezekiah a sign to confirm His promises. Hezekiah responded with a beautiful psalm of thanksgiving (38:1-22).

The final event concerned Hezekiah's response to a Babylonian delegation's visit. The king showed the Babylonians his wealth and military supplies. Isaiah confronted Hezekiah and prophesied that someday the Babylonians would carry off his wealth and some of his descendants would serve in the Babylonian king's palace. Isaiah's words did not agitate Hezekiah since the events would not occur in the king's lifetime (39:1-8).

1. DIVINE DELIVERANCE (ISA. 36:1–37:38)

Observe the close parallels between Isaiah 36:1–39:8 and 2 Kings 18:13–20:19. The Lord spoke through two divinely inspired writers to emphasize the importance of trust in Him.

When Sargon II [SAHR gahn], king of Assyria, died in battle in 705 B.C., rebellions broke out across the Assyrian Empire as nations hoped Sargon's son Sennacherib would be too weak to hold the empire together. Sennacherib, however, demonstrated his power by quelling the unrest in the south and east of his empire and then turning his attention to the west. In 701 B.C. Sennacherib invaded Judah. As part of his campaign against Judah's fortified cities, the Assyrian king besieged Lachish [LAY kish].

As the siege of Lachish neared an end, Sennacherib sent the Rabshakeh [RAB-shuh keh], a highly important and influential Assyrian official, and a huge army to encourage Hezekiah to surrender Jerusalem. By engaging in psychological warfare, the Rabshakeh hoped to discourage the people and force the city to surrender thus saving the Assyrian army a lengthy siege. He mocked Judah's trust in Egypt, suggested the Lord was angry with Hezekiah for destroying the high places and altars throughout the nation, ridiculed Judah's weak military, and declared the Assyrians served as the instruments of the Lord's wrath (36:1-10).

Hezekiah's officials requested the Rabshakeh speak in the international diplomatic language of Aramaic rather than Hebrew because those people of Judah on the wall could understand Hebrew and would find the Rabshakeh's words demoralizing. The Rabshakeh stated the people in Jerusalem needed to hear since Hezekiah's decision would directly affect their welfare. The Assyrian official graphically depicted the horrors of living in a besieged city. The Rabshakeh then encouraged the people not to trust in the Lord. He stated that since other gods had not protected their nations from Assyria, the people of Judah could not expect the Lord to protect them (36:11-22).

Hezekiah immediately went to the temple to pray for the Lord's intervention and sent his top officials to consult Isaiah. The prophet sent word to Hezekiah not to be afraid. The Lord would punish the Assyrians for their arrogance and mocking of the Lord. Sennacherib and his army would return home where the Assyrian king would meet a violent death (37:1-7).

Meanwhile Sennacherib heard that the ruler of Cush was marching against him. Knowing Hezekiah might believe that

Cush's intervention would save Judah, Sennacherib sent a letter to Hezekiah indicating he would deal with the threat and then attack Jerusalem. Upon receiving the letter, Hezekiah took it to the temple, spread it out before the Lord, and prayed for the Lord's intervention. The king stated the gods of other nations could not help those nations because those gods did not exist, but the Lord could deliver His people (37:8-20).

Isaiah sent a message from the Lord to Hezekiah to encourage him to have faith in the Lord because the Lord was about to perform a miracle to save Jerusalem and punish Assyria. The Lord gave a sign to Hezekiah that in three years' time, the people of Judah would again be farming their land as they normally did and reaping their harvests. The Lord would defend Jerusalem because of His reputation and because of His promise to David. Following the Lord's declaration, the angel of the Lord passed through the Assyrian camp and struck down 185,000. Terrified by the loss of so many troops and afraid of Judah's powerful God, Sennacherib returned home where two of his sons later assassinated him as he worshiped his false god (37:21-38).

2. DIVINE HEALING (ISA. 38:1-22)

Verse 1: *In those days Hezekiah became terminally ill. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came and said to him, "This is what the LORD says: 'Put your affairs in order, for you are about to die; you will not recover.'"*

The chronological sequence of Isaiah 36–37 and 38–39 is a complex issue. However, likely the events of chapters 38-39 occurred in 704-703 B.C. prior to the events of chapters 36-37, which occurred in 701 B.C. In any case, the events of Isaiah 38–39 occur prior to those of Isaiah 36–37 because Isaiah 38:6 indicates the Sennacherib Crisis still lies in the future. Furthermore the Babylonian king mentioned in Isaiah 39:1 seems to have been out of the historical picture after 703 B.C.

Why did the Lord inspire Isaiah to record the events out of chronological sequence? Two reasons may be suggested. First, the introduction of the Babylonians as the next great power (Isa. 39) provides a fitting introduction to chapters 40-66, the Lord's prophecy through Isaiah concerning the future Jewish exiles in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem and beyond.

Second, the Lord may have inspired Isaiah to reverse the chronological order to dramatically illustrate the folly of

trusting in anyone or anything except the Lord, a message He had consistently tried to drive home to His people. Hezekiah had been a good king who had led his people to return to the Lord (2 Chron. 29:1–31:21), but he was certainly not the ideal King the Lord had promised (Isa. 9:1-7), nor should people trust in him for salvation.

After having recorded the account of the Lord's miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem during the Sennacherib Crisis (36:1–37:38) and His healing of Hezekiah (38:1-22), Isaiah then presented an illustration of Hezekiah's fallibility and folly. The king's pride in his possessions and willingness to ally his nation with Babylonia eventually led to Judah's conquest by Babylonia (39:1-8). After providing powerful examples of the benefits of trusting in the Lord and before turning to prophesy encouragement to the future exiles in Babylon, Isaiah offered another encouragement to find salvation and life in the Lord (Isa. 38) and one final warning regarding failure to trust in Him (Isa. 39).

Isaiah 38:1, the first Lesson Passages verse, records that Hezekiah became terminally ill (38:1). While the nature of his illness is not specified, some Bible students suggest the king may have contracted leprosy since the illness affected his skin (38:21) and Hezekiah evidently was not able to enter the temple probably because he was regarded as unclean (38:22; see Lev. 13:18-23).

The Lord's command to Hezekiah to set his affairs in order might indicate He had sent an illness to judge Hezekiah, perhaps for arrogant pride (see 2 Chron. 32:24-26). Isaiah simply stated Hezekiah became ill, and the Lord instructed the king to prepare for death. The command *put your affairs in order* may have included selecting a successor to rule after him and getting right with the Lord. Recovery seemed not to be an option.

Verse 2: *Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD.*

Isaiah's announcement devastated Hezekiah. At the time he had no heir to the throne. His son Manasseh, who became king at age 12, was not yet born (see 2 Kings 21:1; Isa. 38:5). In his grief, Hezekiah turned to the Lord in prayer.

Verse 3: *He said, "Please, LORD, remember how I have walked before You faithfully and wholeheartedly, and have done what is good in Your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.*

In his prayer Hezekiah asked the Lord to remember, a request elsewhere included in fervent prayers (Ex. 32:13; Judg.

16:28). Remembering constituted more than just recalling a fact or event. To petition the Lord to remember the past was in reality to request Him to act in the present.

In his prayer Hezekiah appealed to the Lord to act based on his past commitment and service to the Lord. The word *walked* referred to a person's lifestyle. Hezekiah declared he had tried to live with a single-minded, wholehearted focus on the Lord. He had tried to follow the Lord's guidance and do what the Lord declared right. Hezekiah knew he was not perfect, but he had tried to be what the Lord desired.

Verse 4: *Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah:*

According to 2 Kings 20:4-5, Isaiah had not yet left the immediate area of the palace-temple complex when the Lord instructed him to return to Hezekiah with good news. Isaiah remained open to the Lord's message and obedient to His commands.

Verse 5: *"Go and tell Hezekiah that this is what the LORD God of your ancestor David says: I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Look, I am going to add 15 years to your life.*

The Lord's response to Hezekiah's prayer on this occasion reveals the impact of a faithful life. The Lord extended Hezekiah's life because of His grace and because of David's faithfulness. The Lord extends His steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love Him (Ex. 34:6-7).

Verse 6: *And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; I will defend this city.*

The Lord not only promised to heal Hezekiah and extend his life, He also promised to deliver him and Jerusalem from the Assyrian threat. In His grace the Lord gave Hezekiah far more than he desired. The Lord's new message reversed His previous message to Hezekiah (see Isa. 38:2).

When Hezekiah asked for a sign to prove he would be healed and return to the temple (see 2 Kings 20:8-11; Isa. 38:22), the Lord provided one. The Lord did something human beings could not do to demonstrate His presence in this situation.

Isaiah recorded Hezekiah's song of thanksgiving following his recovery. Hezekiah recounted his physical and mental suffering, his prayer for the Lord's help, and his healing. The king ended the psalm with praise to the Lord. Isaiah concluded his report of Hezekiah's illness and recovery with a note (see Isa. 38:9-22).

When facing grave difficulty, Hezekiah prayed earnestly to the Lord and later thanked the Lord for graciously respond-

ing with healing and deliverance. His prayers of intercession and thanksgiving helped him maintain spiritual alertness by placing him in honest conversation with the Lord and opening him to receive the Lord's guidance, grace, and strength.

3. HUMAN FOLLY (ISA. 39:1-8)

Verse 1: *At that time Merodach-baladan son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a gift to Hezekiah since he heard that he had been sick and had recovered.*

Merodach-baladan [mih ROH dak-BAL uh dan] came from southern Babylonia. Following the death of the Assyrian king about 721 B.C., Merodach-baladan rebelled against Assyria and ruled an independent state of Babylonia until it was conquered by the Assyrian ruler Sargon II in 710 B.C. Later Merodach-baladan again broke free and ruled an independent Babylonia for a brief period in 704-703 B.C.

News regarding Hezekiah's illness and recovery would have taken some time to reach Babylonia. Probably the Babylonian delegation arrived in Jerusalem sometime in 703 B.C. Since Merodach-baladan constituted one of the leaders of rebellion against Assyria, he would have been quite interested in winning the goodwill of small states around the empire and encouraging them to rebel.

Merodach-baladan's letter and gift to Hezekiah constituted more than just a thoughtful gesture. The Babylonian ruler planned to involve Judah in the rebellion against Assyria. Babylon apparently wanted to know if Judah's army could participate effectively in a rebellion and whether Judah possessed enough wealth to make it worth conquering in the near or distant future.

Verse 2: *Hezekiah was pleased with them, and showed them his treasure house—the silver, the gold, the spices, and the precious oil—and all his armory, and everything that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his palace and in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them.*

Hezekiah must have been quite impressed and flattered that a delegation from the much larger and more powerful nation of Babylonia had come to visit him. He proudly gave the delegation a grand tour of his treasure house and showed off his collection of precious metals, valuable spices, and expensive oils. He then took the Babylonians into his armory and showed them his stockpile of military armor and weapons.

The Babylonian delegation's visit afforded Hezekiah the perfect opportunity to glorify the Lord by telling how trusting

in Him brings far greater security and benefit than trusting in wealth, military might, or allies. Instead Hezekiah trusted in his possessions and plans. Isaiah had emphasized again and again the importance of trusting in the Lord. Hezekiah had seen the Lord's power as He restored his health. Yet the king chose to focus on human sources of security and prosperity.

The Babylonian envoys could have had two hidden agendas: to evaluate Judah's military capacity as a possible ally against Assyria and to evaluate Judah's wealth as a possible later target for conquest. After the Babylonian delegation left, Isaiah met with Hezekiah. He asked what the visitors had said and from where they had come. Hezekiah offered little information and stated only that the men had come from the distant nation of Babylonia. Isaiah then asked Hezekiah what the visitors had seen. Hezekiah responded that they had seen everything in his palace and storehouses. From Hezekiah's brief report, Isaiah knew Hezekiah had turned from dependence on the Lord to pride in and dependence on human resources (Isa. 39:3-4).

As king, Hezekiah had a spiritual, political, and moral obligation to protect his people. He needed to avoid entangling them in doomed alliances and jeopardizing them by revealing all their wealth, defenses, and military strength to a potential threat. Hezekiah needed to set an example of spiritual alertness that encouraged his people to quietly trust in the Lord alone.

Verse 5: *Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD of Hosts:*

Isaiah had not questioned Hezekiah out of his own curiosity. The Lord had sent him to confront the king, and Isaiah prepared to speak the Lord's message of judgment against Hezekiah. Significantly Isaiah referred to the Lord as *the LORD of Hosts*, a title often used to emphasize the Lord's judgment and power (see Isa. 1:24; 9:19; 13:4). No human or supernatural force can stand against the Lord and His hosts, but Hezekiah had foolishly traded trust in the almighty, dependable Lord for trust in his wealth, weapons, and schemes. Abandoning trust in the Lord would only bring disaster.

Verse 6: *'The time will certainly come when everything in your palace and all that your fathers have stored up until this day will be carried off to Babylon; nothing will be left,' says the LORD.*

The Lord had healed Hezekiah and granted him 15 additional years of life (38:5). He had promised the Assyrians

would not capture Jerusalem because He would defend the city (38:6). He had called Hezekiah to place his trust in Him and experience real security (30:15). Hezekiah had no need to depend on his possessions, military force, or alliances with other nations.

Hezekiah had proudly shown the Babylonian delegation his accumulated wealth and military equipment, but a time would come when everything he had shown them would be gone. Hezekiah had tried to impress Babylon with his wealth and power, but a time would come when Babylon would possess all Judah's treasures. The Lord's message to Hezekiah focused on the lesson Hezekiah needed to learn. Possessions and alliances have no lasting or ultimate value. No individual or nation can safely trust in them because they can so easily be taken away. Only trust in the eternal, almighty Lord will never be disappointed.

Verse 7: *'Some of your descendants who come from you will be taken away, and they will be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.' "*

The loss would be far worse than merely the loss of possessions. The Babylonians would take some of Hezekiah's royal descendants to Babylon where they would become eunuchs in the Babylonian king's palace. Since the Babylonians would emasculate them, they would not produce heirs for the line of David. The Lord in His grace would maintain the Davidic line, but the line would suffer because of Hezekiah's actions.

Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in 598 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar [NEB yoo kad NEZ uhr] of Babylon besieged Jerusalem and took King Jehoiachin [jih HOY uh kin] and his family and the treasures of the temple and palace to Babylon (2 Kings 24:10-17).

Verse 8: *Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good." For he thought: There will be peace and security during my lifetime.*

This verse reveals Hezekiah's self-centered and short-term focus on his actions. As long as judgment came sometime in the future after his death that was fine with him because it would not affect him. These words expressed little or no interest in the fate of his descendants, the Davidic line, or his nation. Hezekiah clearly valued his own security and peace over the security of others and over faithful, wholehearted obedience to the Lord. His trust in the Lord would save Jerusalem from destruction by Assyria (Isa. 36:1-37:38), but his failure to be spiritually alert when visited by the Babylonian

delegation would lead to the eventual destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonia.

Hezekiah's pride and selfishness led him to focus only on his own well-being. His pride blinded him to the possible consequences of revealing too much to the Babylonians and becoming entangled in a relationship with them. As king, Hezekiah should have considered long-term consequences in order to promote and ensure the security and prosperity of his nation.