

Crisis of Identity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 1:1–9, Isa. 1:10–17, Isa. 1:18, Isa. 1:19–31, Isa. 5:1–7.*

Memory Text: “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD, ‘though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool’ ” (*Isaiah 1:18, NKJV*).

Lost in the land of forgetfulness. If you drive in Ireland along a narrow country lane lined with hedgerows, you may find the way blocked by a herd of cows ambling home after a crunchy meal. Even if no herdsman is with them, they will go to their owner's barn. They will know where, and to whom, they belong.

If a small boy in a store gets separated from his mother and yells, “I've lost my mommy!” he may not know exactly where he is, or where his mother is, but amid a sea of mothers walking through the store, he will know the one mother who, alone, is his own.

Sad to say, unlike even those Irish cows (much less the little lost boy), the Judaeans forgot that they belonged to the Lord, their heavenly Lord, and thus lost their true identity as the covenant people. “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (*Isa. 1:2, 3, NRSV*).

This week we'll take a look at God's work to restore His people to Himself.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 2.

“Hear, O Heavens!” (*Isa. 1:1–9*)

The book of Isaiah briefly introduces itself by identifying the author (“son of Amoz”), the source of his message (a “vision”), and his topic (Judah and its capital, Jerusalem, during the reign of four kings). The topic also identifies Isaiah’s primary audience as the people of his own country during the time in which he lived. The prophet spoke to them concerning their own condition and destiny.

By mentioning the kings during whose reigns he was active, Isaiah narrows down the audience and ties the book to the historical, political events of a certain period. This time frame directs us to the accounts of 2 Kings 15–20 and 2 Chronicles 26–32.

Read Isaiah 1:2. What is the essence of the message here? What is the Lord saying? How has this same idea been seen all through sacred history? Could it be said of the Christian church today, as well? Explain your answer.

Notice how Isaiah’s message begins with the words “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth” (*NRSV; compare Deut. 30:19, Deut. 31:28*). The Lord isn’t implying that heaven and earth, themselves, can hear and understand. Instead, He does it for emphasis.

When an ancient Near Eastern king, such as a Hittite emperor, made a political treaty with a lesser ruler, he invoked his gods as witnesses to emphasize that any violation of the agreement would surely be noticed and punished. However, when the divine King of kings made a covenant with the Israelites in the days of Moses, He did not refer to other gods as witnesses. As the only true God, He called, instead, for the heavens and earth to fulfill this role (*see also Deut. 4:26*).

Read carefully Isaiah 1:1–9. Summarize on the lines below what the sins of Judah were. Take special note, also, of the results of those sins. What was Judah guilty of, and what happened because of her guilt? At the same time, what hope is presented in Isaiah 1:9?

Rotten Ritualism *(Isa. 1:10–17)*

Read Isaiah 1:10. Why do you think he was using the imagery of Sodom and Gomorrah? What point was the Lord making?

Read Isaiah 1:11–15. What is the Lord telling the people there? Why did the Lord reject the worship that His people were offering Him?

The same hands that offered sacrifices and were lifted up in prayer were “full of blood”; that is, guilty of violence and oppression of others (*Isa. 1:15; Isa. 58:3, 4*). By mistreating other members of the covenant community, they were showing contempt for the Protector of all Israelites. Sins against other people were sins against the Lord.

Of course, God Himself had instituted the ritual worship system (*Leviticus 1–16*) and designated the Jerusalem temple as the appropriate place for it (*1 Kings 8:10, 11*). But the rituals were intended to function within the context of the covenant God had made with these people. It was God’s covenant with Israel that made it possible for Him to dwell among them at the sanctuary/temple. So, rituals and prayers performed there were valid only if they expressed faithfulness to Him and His covenant. People who offered sacrifices without repenting from unjust actions toward other members of the covenant community were performing ritual lies. Thus, their sacrifices were not only invalid—but they also were sins! Their ritual actions said they were loyal, but their behavior proved they had broken the covenant.

Read Isaiah 1:16, 17. What is the Lord commanding that His people do? How do these verses, in this context, parallel what Jesus said in Matthew 23:23–28? What message can we find for ourselves today in these texts and in the context in which they are given?

The Argument of Forgiveness (*Isa. 1:18*)

Read Isaiah 1:18. After going over it numerous times, write what you believe the Lord is saying here (read a few verses beyond it to get the whole context).

God has provided powerful evidence that the Judaeans, the accused, are guilty of breach of contract (*Isa. 1:2–15*), and He has appealed to them to reform (*Isa. 1:16, 17*). This appeal suggests there is hope. After all, why urge a criminal deserving execution to change his ways? How could a prisoner on death row “rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (*NRSV*)? But when God says “Come now, let us argue it out” (*Isa. 1:18, NRSV*), we can see the Lord still seeking to reason with His people, still seeking to get them to repent and turn from their evil ways, no matter how degenerate they have become.

The Lord says to them that “*Your red sins shall become white.*” Why are sins red? Because red is the color of the “blood” (blood guilt) that covers the hands of the people (*Isa. 1:15*). White, by contrast, is the color of purity, the absence of blood guilt. Here, God is offering to change them. This is the kind of language King David used when he cried out to God for forgiveness for his sin of taking Bathsheba and destroying her husband (*read Ps. 51:7, 14*). In Isaiah 1:18, God’s argument is an offer to forgive His people!

How does God’s offer of forgiveness serve as an argument for them to change their ways? (*Compare Isaiah 1:18 to Isaiah 44:22.*)

Now we see the purpose of God’s sharp words of warning against His people. They are not to reject His people but to bring them back to Him. His offer of forgiveness is the mighty argument supporting His appeal for the people to purify themselves morally (*Isa. 1:16, 17*). His forgiveness makes it possible for them to be transformed by His power. Here we see the seeds of the “new covenant,” prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31–34, in which forgiveness is the basis of a new-heart relationship with God. We start off “in the red,” owing a debt we can never repay. From the humble position of acknowledging our need for forgiveness, we are ready to accept everything God has to give.

To Eat or Be Eaten (*Isa. 1:19–31*)

Read Isaiah 1:19–31. What theme appears here that is seen all through the Bible?

Notice the logical structure in Isaiah 1:19, 20: *If* the people choose to be willing and obedient to God, they will *eat* the good of the land (*Isa. 1:19*). By contrast, *if* they refuse His offer of forgiveness and restoration and rebel against Him, they will be *eaten* by the sword (*Isa. 1:20*). The choice is theirs. These verses, then, contain a conditional blessing and curse.

Isaiah 1 reiterates and applies the words of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 30:19, 20 at the time when the covenant with the nation of Israel was set up: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses” (*NRSV*).

Look at those words from Moses. Notice, there is no middle ground. It is either life or death, blessings or curses. Why do you think there is only one of two choices for us? Why can’t there be some sort of compromise?

These words of Moses summarize the series of warnings, blessings, and curses that conclude the formation of the covenant in Deuteronomy 27–30 (*compare Leviticus 26*). Elements of this covenant include (1) the recounting of what God had done for them, (2) conditions/stipulations (commandments) to be observed in order for the covenant to be maintained, (3) reference to witnesses, and (4) blessings and curses to warn people what would happen if they violated the covenant conditions.

Scholars have found that these elements appear in the same order in political treaties involving non-Israelite peoples, such as the Hittites. So, for establishing God’s covenant with the Israelites, He used a form they would understand and would impress upon them as forcefully as possible the nature and consequences of the mutually binding relationship into which they were choosing to enter. The potential benefits of the covenant were staggering, but if Israel broke their agreement, they would be worse off than ever.

In your own Christian walk, how have you experienced the principle of blessings and curses as seen above?

Ominous Love Song (*Isa. 5:1–7*)

Read the song in the above verses. What is the meaning of this parable?

God explains the meaning of the parable only at the end, in Isaiah 5:7. By using a parable, He helps the people to look at themselves objectively in order to admit their true condition. God effectively used this approach with King David (*see 2 Sam. 12:1–13*). By calling this a “love-song” (*NRSV*), God reveals at the outset His motive toward His people. His relationship with them originates from His character, which is love (*1 John 4:8*). He expects a response of love in return. But instead of “grapes,” He gets “wild grapes,” which means, in the Hebrew, “stinking things.”

What does the Lord mean when He says in Isaiah 5:4, “What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?” (*NRSV*).

God says in the next verses: “And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste” (*Isa. 5:5, 6, NRSV*).

When we sin, God does not immediately cut us off from Himself by removing His protection and destroying us. He patiently gives us an opportunity to receive forgiveness (*see 2 Pet. 3:9*). He does not cut off anyone who responds to Him. He appeals as long as there is hope for a response. He does not immediately take no for an answer, because He knows we are ignorant and deceived by sin. But if He gets nowhere with us, He ultimately acknowledges our choice and lets us remain the way we have chosen to be (*see Rev. 22:11*).

If we persistently reject God’s appeals through His Spirit, we can eventually pass the point of no return (*Matt. 12:31, 32*). Turning away from Christ is dangerous (*Heb. 6:4–6*). There is only so much God can do, because He respects our free choice.

Take the concept found in Isaiah 5:4, about “What more could have been done to My vineyard,” (*NKJV*) and look at that in light of the Cross, where God offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins, paying with His flesh for our violation of His law. What more could have been done for us than what He did there? How does dwelling on the Cross give us assurance of salvation and motivate us to repent and change our ways?

Further Thought: In the context of Isaiah 1:4, Ellen White wrote: “The professed people of God had separated from God, and had lost their wisdom and perverted their understanding. They could not see afar off; for they had forgotten that they had been purged from their old sins. They moved restlessly and uncertainly under darkness, seeking to obliterate from their minds the memory of the freedom, assurance, and happiness of their former estate. They plunged into all kinds of presumptuous, foolhardy madness, placed themselves in opposition to the providences of God, and deepened the guilt that was already upon them. They listened to the charges of Satan against the divine character, and represented God as devoid of mercy and forgiveness.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1137.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How can you “wash yourselves”? What does that phrase mean? (See *Phil. 2:12, 13*.)
- 2 How did Jesus adapt, expand, and apply the love song of the vineyard? (*Matt. 21:33–45, Mark 12:1–12, Luke 20:9–19*.) What lessons are in the above story for us as Seventh-day Adventists?
- 3 What is the relationship between the forgiveness God offers and the transformation He accomplishes in our lives? Which comes first, transformation and then forgiveness, or forgiveness and then transformation? And why is it important to know which comes first?
- 4 In the quotation above, Ellen G. White says people placed themselves in opposition to “the providences of God.” What does that mean?

Summary: When God’s people forget Him and take His blessings for granted, He reminds them they are accountable to their covenant with Him. Mercifully, He points out their condition, warns them about the destructive consequences of abandoning His protection, and urges them to allow Him to heal and cleanse them.

Duped in Ukraine

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

A Seventh-day Adventist deacon never expected to be duped by a mother and her teenage son whom he invited into his home after they fled conflict in eastern Ukraine. But he has no regrets. “We acted with sincere hearts for God, and we will let God act as the judge between her and us,” Valentin Zaitsev said.

The story began in 2015 when Valentin learned that a first wave of internally displaced people had reached his Black Sea city, Mykolaiv. The plight of the internally displaced people touched his heart. So Valentin, a construction foreman, set out with his wife to a government-run hostel, where they found 50 displaced people living in two buildings, six to eight people per room. Valentin introduced himself as a Christian and asked the displaced people what was needed. The immediate reply was diapers and wet wipes. “We went to the supermarket and bought both,” Valentin said. “We then asked what else we could provide, and they asked for underwear, women’s hygienic items, and potatoes. The authorities had given them a place to stay but not much else.”

As a friendship grew, Valentin invited his new friends to Bible studies. Eleven agreed, and an Adventist pastor began to study with them every evening. Then violence erupted at the hostel, and a 19-year-old man, Valery, was hospitalized with stab wounds. When Valentin and his wife visited the hospital, the teen’s mother, Natasha, pleaded for a new place to stay. Valentin was renting a three-room apartment, and he offered a room to her and her son.

For a while, everything seemed fine. Natasha even attended the Adventist church. But then Valentin found out that she was not penniless as she claimed and that she was taking advantage of people’s kindness to con them out of money. “We fed her and her son and paid their cell phone bill,” he said. “But then we learned that they were not poor. We asked them to move out.” Natasha and her son had lived with the family for six months.

Looking back, Valentin said the experience was a blessing. Natasha proved a big help around the house, cooking, washing, and babysitting his three children. But the biggest blessing, he said, was the opportunity to love her. “We received joy and blessings because we were able to serve someone else,” he said. “Our family became better. I would not do anything differently.”

Valentin believes that it is important to help everyone whether or not they accept Jesus.



“Our duty is to live and serve, and the rest is up to God,” he said. “We water with goodness, and God collects the harvest.”

Part of this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help construct an elementary school and high school in Bucha, Ukraine.

Crisis of Leadership



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 6:1–4, Isa. 6:5–7, Isa. 6:8, Isa. 6:9–13.*

Memory Text: “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple” (*Isaiah 6:1, NKJV*).

When asked by one of his disciples about the ingredients of good government, Confucius answered: “ ‘Sufficient food, sufficient weapons, and the confidence of the common people.’

“ ‘But,’ asked the disciple, ‘suppose you had no choice but to dispense with one of those three, which would you forego?’

“ ‘Weapons,’ said Confucius.

“His disciple persisted: ‘Suppose you were then forced to dispense with one of the two that are left, which would you forego?’

“Replied Confucius, ‘Food. For from of old, hunger has been the lot of all men, but a people that no longer trusts its rulers is lost indeed.’ ”—Edited by Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1989), p. 215.

People do, indeed, want strong, trustworthy leadership. When a soldier was signing up for a second term of duty, the army recruiter asked why he wanted to reenlist. “I tried civilian life,” he said, “but nobody is in charge out there.”

This week, we will look at Judah’s crisis of leadership and the sad results that followed.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 9.

The King Is Dead. Long Live the King!

Isaiah 6:1 talks about the death of King Uzziah. Read **2 Chronicles 26** and then answer this question: What is the significance of King Uzziah's death?

Different perspectives can be given regarding the death of this king.

1. Although Uzziah's reign was long and prosperous, "when he had become strong he grew proud, to his destruction" (*2 Chron. 26:16, NRSV*) and attempted to offer incense in the temple. When the priests rightly stopped him because he was not authorized as a priestly descendant of Aaron (*2 Chron. 26:18*), the king became angry. At this moment, when the king refused reproof, the Lord immediately struck him with leprosy, which he had "to the day of his death, and being leprous lived in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the LORD" (*2 Chron. 26:21, NRSV*). How ironic that Isaiah saw a vision of the pure, immortal, divine King in His house/temple in the very year the impure human king died!

2. There is a striking contrast between Uzziah and Isaiah. Uzziah reached for holiness presumptuously, for the wrong reason (pride), and instead became ritually impure, so that he was cut off from holiness. Isaiah, on the other hand, allowed God's holiness to reach him. He humbly admitted his weakness and yearned for moral purity, which he received (*Isa. 6:5-7, NRSV*). Like the tax collector in Jesus' parable, he went away justified: " 'for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted' " (*Luke 18:14, NRSV*).

3. There is a striking similarity between Uzziah's leprous body and the moral condition of his people: "There is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds" (*Isa. 1:6, NRSV*).

4. The death of Uzziah in about 740 B.C. marks a major crisis in the leadership of God's people. The death of any absolute ruler makes his or her country vulnerable during a transition of power. But Judah was in special danger, because Tiglath-pileser III had ascended the throne of Assyria a few years before, in 745 B.C., and immediately went on the warpath, which made his nation an invincible superpower that threatened the independent existence of all nations in the Near East. In this time of crisis, God encouraged Isaiah by showing the prophet that He was still in control.

Read carefully 2 Chronicles 26:16. In what ways do each one of us potentially face the same thing? How can dwelling on the Cross protect us from that pitfall?

“Holy, Holy, Holy” (Isa. 6:1–4)

Notice what was happening here in the first four verses of Isaiah 6. The king dies during great political turmoil (the Assyrians are on the warpath). For Isaiah, it could have been a fearful time when he was not sure who was in control.

And then—what happens? While taken in vision, Isaiah gazed upon the blazing glory of God upon His throne, heard the antiphony of shining seraphim (“burning ones”) calling out the words “holy, holy, holy,” felt the resultant seismic shaking of the floor beneath him, and peered through swirling smoke as it filled the temple. It must have been a stunning experience for the prophet. For sure, Isaiah now knew who was in control, despite outward events.

Where is the Lord in this vision? (See Isa. 6:1.) **Why would the Lord make an appearance to Isaiah here, as opposed to anywhere else?** (See Exod. 25:8, Exod. 40:34–38.)

Ezekiel, Daniel, and John were in exile when they received their visions in Ezekiel 1; Daniel 7:9, 10; and Revelation 4, 5. Like Isaiah, they needed special comfort and encouragement that God was still in charge, even though their world was falling apart. (Daniel and Ezekiel were captives in a pagan nation that had destroyed their own, and John had been exiled to a lonely island by a hostile political power.) No doubt, these visions helped give them what they needed to stay faithful, even during a crisis situation.

“As Isaiah beheld this revelation of the glory and majesty of his Lord, he was overwhelmed with a sense of the purity and holiness of God. How sharp the contrast between the matchless perfection of his Creator, and the sinful course of those who, with himself, had long been numbered among the chosen people of Israel and Judah!”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 307.

The transcendent holiness of God, emphasized in Isaiah’s vision, is a basic aspect of his message. God is a holy God, and He demands holiness from His people, a holiness He will give to them if only they will repent, turn from their evil ways, and submit to Him in faith and obedience.

All of us have been in discouraging situations, where from outward appearances all seemed lost. And even if you didn’t get a vision of the “glory of the Lord,” as did Isaiah here, recount the ways in which the Lord was able to sustain you and your faith during these crises. What have you learned from these experiences that you could share with others?

New Personality *(Isa. 6:5–7)*

At the sanctuary/temple, only the high priest could approach the presence of God in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement and only with a protective smokescreen of incense, or he would die (*Lev. 16:2, 12, 13*). Isaiah saw the Lord, even though he was not the high priest, and he was not burning incense! The temple filled with smoke (*Isa. 6:4*), reminding us of the cloud in which God's glory appeared on the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 16:2*). Awestruck and thinking he was finished (*compare Exod. 33:20; Judg. 6:22, 23*), Isaiah cried out with an acknowledgment of his sin and the sin of his people (*Isa. 6:5*), reminiscent of the high priest's confession on the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 16:21*).

“Standing, as it were, in the full light of the divine presence within the inner sanctuary, he realized that if left to his own imperfection and inefficiency, he would be utterly unable to accomplish the mission to which he had been called.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 308.

Why did the seraph use a live, or burning, coal from the altar to cleanse Isaiah's lips? (*Isa. 6:6, 7*)

The seraph explained that through touching the prophet's lips his guilt and sin were removed (*Isa. 6:7*). The sin is not specified, but it need not be limited to wrong speech, because lips signify not only speech but also the entire person who utters it. Having received moral purification, Isaiah was now able to offer pure praise to God.

Fire is an agent of purification, because it burns away impurity (*see Num. 31:23*). But the seraph used a coal from the special, holy fire of the altar, which God Himself had lighted and which was kept perpetually burning there (*Lev. 6:12*). So, the seraph made Isaiah holy, as well as pure. There is more. In worship at the sanctuary, or temple, the main reason for taking a coal from the altar was to light incense. Compare Leviticus 16:12, 13, where the high priest is to take a censer full of coals from the altar and use it to light incense. But in Isaiah 6, the seraph applies the coal to Isaiah rather than to incense. Whereas Uzziah wanted to offer incense, Isaiah became like incense! Just as holy fire lights incense to fill God's house with holy fragrance, it lights up the prophet to spread a holy message. It is no accident that in the next verses of Isaiah 6 (*Isa. 6:8 and following*) God sends Isaiah out to His people.

Read prayerfully Isaiah's response (*Isa. 6:5*) to his vision of God. How do we see in it an expression of the basic problem, that of a sinful people existing in a universe created by a “‘Holy, holy, holy’ ” God? (*Isa. 6:3, NRSV*). Why was Christ on the cross the only possible answer to this problem? What happened at the cross that solved this problem?

Royal Commission *(Isa. 6:8)*

“Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me” *(Isa. 6:8)*.

Having been purified, Isaiah immediately responded to God’s call for a representative whom He could send out on His behalf. In New Testament terms, Isaiah would have been called an apostle; that is, “one who is sent.”

Interestingly enough, the book of Isaiah does not begin, as do some other prophetic books, with the prophet describing his prophetic call (*compare Jer. 1:4–10, Ezekiel 1–3*). In other words, he must have already been called to be a prophet, even before the events of chapter 6. The Bible does show that a divine encounter can encourage a prophet even after the ministry has begun (*Moses: Exodus 34; Elijah: 1 Kings 19*). In contrast to other examples, too, where God tells people they are to be prophets, in Isaiah 6 the prophet volunteers for a special mission. It appears that chapters 1–5 of Isaiah represent conditions at the time when Isaiah was first called, after which God jump-started his ministry by encouraging him at the temple and reconfirming his commission as God’s prophetic spokesman.

God encouraged Isaiah at His temple. Is there evidence elsewhere in the Bible that God’s sanctuary is a place of encouragement? *(Read Psalm 73 (see Ps. 73:17), Heb. 4:14–16, Heb. 10:19–23, and Revelation 5.)* **What do these texts tell us?**

Not only does God’s sanctuary throb with awesome power but also it’s a place where weak and faulty people such as ourselves can find refuge. We can be reassured by knowing that God is working to rescue us through Christ, our High Priest.

John also saw Christ represented as a sacrificial lamb that had just been slaughtered, its throat slit (*Rev. 5:6*). This was not a pretty sight. The description makes the point that although Christ was raised from the dead and has ascended to heaven, He continually carries the Cross event with Him. He is still lifted up in order to draw all people to Himself at His altar.

How have you found encouragement by entering God’s heavenly temple, by faith, in prayer? Hebrews 4:16 invites you to approach God’s throne boldly to “receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” *(NRSV)*. **If someone were to ask you how you have found grace and mercy in your time of need, how would you respond?**

Appalling Appeal *(Isa. 6:9–13)*

When God recommissioned Isaiah, why did He give the prophet such a strange message to take to His people? (*Isa. 6:9, 10.*)

Lest we should think that Isaiah heard wrong or that this message is unimportant, Jesus cited this passage to explain why He taught in parables (*Matt. 13:13–15*).

God does not want any to perish (*2 Pet. 3:9*), which explains why He sent Isaiah to the people of Judah—and Jesus to the world. God’s desire is not to destroy but to save eternally. But while some people respond positively to His appeals, others become firmer in their resistance. Nevertheless, God keeps on appealing to them in order to give them more and more opportunities to repent. Yet, the more they resist, the harder they become. So, in that sense, what God does to them results in the hardening of their hearts, even though He would rather that these actions soften them. God’s love toward us is unchanging; our individual response to His love is the crucial variable.

The role of a minister, such as Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or even Christ, is to keep on appealing, even if people reject the message. God said to Ezekiel: “Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them” (*Ezek. 2:5, NRSV*). God’s role and that of His servants is to give people a fair choice, so that they will have adequate warning (*compare Ezek. 3:16–21*), even if they end up choosing destruction and exile (*Isa. 6:11–13*).

With these ideas in mind, how do we understand God’s role in hardening Pharaoh’s heart?

In Exodus 4:21, God says, “‘but I will harden his heart’ ” (*NRSV*). This is the first of nine times when God said He would harden Pharaoh’s heart. But there also were nine times when Pharaoh hardened his own heart (*for example, see Exod. 8:15, 32; Exod. 9:34*).

Clearly Pharaoh possessed some kind of free will, or he would not have been able to harden his own heart. But the fact that God also hardened Pharaoh’s heart indicates that God initiated the circumstances to which Pharaoh reacted when he made his choices, choices to reject the signs God had given him. Had Pharaoh been open to those signs, his heart would have been softened, not hardened, by them.

In your own experience with the Lord, have you ever felt a hardening of your heart to the Holy Spirit? Think through what caused it. If you didn’t find that concept frightening then (after all, that’s part of what having a hard heart is all about), how do you view it now? What is the way of escape? (See 1 Cor. 10:13.)

Further Thought: “Iniquitous practices had become so prevalent among all classes that the few who remained true to God were often tempted to lose heart and to give way to discouragement and despair. It seemed as if God’s purposes for Israel were about to fail and that the rebellious nation was to suffer a fate similar to that of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“In the face of such conditions it is not surprising that when, during the last year of Uzziah’s reign, Isaiah was called to bear to Judah God’s messages of warning and reproof, he shrank from the responsibility. He well knew that he would encounter obstinate resistance. As he realized his own inability to meet the situation and thought of the stubbornness and unbelief of the people for whom he was to labor, his task seemed hopeless. Should he in despair relinquish his mission and leave Judah undisturbed to their idolatry? Were the gods of Nineveh to rule the earth in defiance of the God of heaven?”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 306, 307.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 If a skeptic or an atheist were to challenge you with the question, “How can you show that your God is in charge?” what would you answer?
- 2 If God is in charge, why do innocent people suffer? Does Isaiah 1:19, 20 mean that *in the present life* only good things are supposed to happen to God’s faithful people and only bad things happen to those who rebel? (Compare with Job 1, 2, Psalm 37, Psalm 73.) Can we reconcile our understanding of God’s character with the bad that happens to people? Do we need to?
- 3 In Isaiah 6, why are there so many connections to the Day of Atonement? Consider the fact that on this yearly judgment day God purified His people by cleansing sin from loyal ones (Lev. 16:30) and purging out the disloyal (Lev. 23:29, 30).

Summary: At a time of insecurity, when the weakness of human leadership was painfully obvious, Isaiah was given a grand vision of the supreme Leader of the universe. Petrified by inadequacy but purified and empowered by mercy, Isaiah was ready to go forth as God’s ambassador into a hostile world.

Hope in a Plane Crash

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

The world watched in horror when a midair plane collision killed 71 people in Germany in 2002 and, two years later, a grieving father retaliated.

Vladimir Shevil, who was mourning the death of his own daughter to cancer, found hope amid the tragedy. He found Jesus.

Vladimir remembers Nadezhda, whose name means “hope” in Russian, joyfully coming home with a new Bible that someone had given to her at school in their hometown in Moldova. The 15-year-old girl spent hours reading the book, often staying up late at night. Vladimir, an occasional churchgoer, didn’t like his daughter’s interest in the Bible. He accused her of wasting her time and said she would be more productive working in the family’s vegetable garden.

“We don’t need the Bible,” he told her. “We have church.”

Nadezhda didn’t argue and obediently went outdoors to tend to the garden.

Two years later, doctors diagnosed Nadezhda with bone cancer. She spent months in the hospital, and a leg was amputated from the hip. She died in 2001 at the age of 18. Vladimir was devastated, and he pleaded with God for answers. “I don’t think that I was such a bad father,” he prayed.

Amid his sorrow, he heard the news in July 2002 that a DHL cargo plane had collided with a Russian airliner flying 45 Russian schoolchildren to a vacation in Spain, killing everyone on both aircraft. Then in 2004, a Russian father who had lost his wife and two children in the crash tracked down and killed the air traffic controller responsible for monitoring the German airspace where the collision occurred. Watching television news, Vladimir saw a journalist ask the father of a girl who had died in the crash whether he also wanted revenge. “No,” the man said. “I have hope that I will meet my daughter again.”

The words touched Vladimir’s heart. He longed for the same hope.

Shortly afterward, he came home to find his wife waiting with Nadezhda’s Bible. Opening it, she read, “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus” (*1 Thess. 4:13, 14, NKJV*).

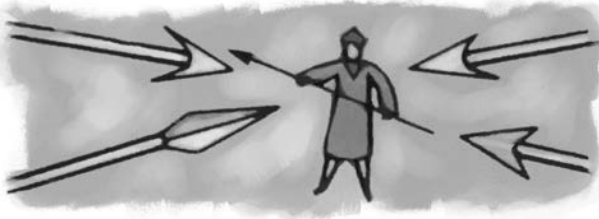
“Here is our hope,” his wife said. “If we believe in God, we will meet our daughter again.”



Today Vladimir is a church deacon, and he joyfully talks about his hope in Jesus’ return. “Thanks to my daughter, we found God,” he said. “We have hope that we will meet our daughter again.”

Part of a 2017 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering helped renovate a retreat center for camp meetings, Pathfinders, and other church activities in Moldova.

When Your World Is Falling Apart



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 7:1–9, Isa. 7:10–13, Isa. 7:14.*

Memory Text: “ “ “If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established’ ” ’ ” (*Isaiah 7:9, NKJV*).

One Sabbath Connie and Roy drove into their driveway after church. A bantam hen flew frantically across the yard in front of them. Something was wrong. The pet birds were supposed to be safely in their pen but had gotten out. Quick investigation showed a tragedy in progress. Beethoven, the neighbor's small dog, also had escaped her yard and was down by the pond with Daisy in her mouth. Daisy was a beautiful laying hen with fluffy white tail feathers. Connie rescued Daisy, but it was too late. Her precious pet, now with a mangled neck, soon died in Connie's arms. She sat down in the yard, holding the dead bird, and wailed.

Another pet was deeply disturbed. A tall, white duck by the name of Waddlesworth saw Connie holding Daisy and seemed to have assumed she had killed her. So, for the next few weeks, whenever Waddlesworth saw Connie, he would viciously attack her, pinching her painfully with his strong bill. Sometimes it is hard to sort out who your friends and enemies are.

This week we'll look at a king of Judah who also had this problem, and we'll seek to understand why he made the wrong choices he did.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 16.

Danger From the North *(Isa. 7:1–9)*

What terrifying crisis did King Ahaz face early in his reign? *(2 Kings 15:37, 38; 2 Kings 16:5, 6; Isaiah 7:1, 2.)*

The kingdoms of northern Israel (Ephraim) and Syria (Aram) ganged up on the smaller country of Judah to the south. This happened when Judah was weakened by attacks from the Edomites and Philistines. In the past, Judah had fought against Israel, but an alliance between Israel and Syria presented an overwhelming peril. It appears Israel and Syria wanted to force Judah to participate with them in a coalition against the mighty power of Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria (*called “Pul” in 2 Kings 15:19*), who continued to threaten them with his expanding empire. Israel and Syria had put aside their longstanding struggle against each other in view of a greater danger. If they could conquer Judah and install a puppet ruler there (*Isa. 7:5, 6*), they could use its resources and manpower.

What was Ahaz’s solution when his world was falling apart? *(2 Kings 16:7–9, 2 Chron. 28:16.)*

Rather than recognizing that God was the only Friend who could rescue him and his country, Ahaz tried to make a friend out of Tiglath-pileser III, the enemy of his enemies. The Assyrian king happily complied with his request for aid against Syria and Israel. Not only did Tiglath-pileser receive a rich bribe from Ahaz, but he also gained a good excuse to take Syria, which he promptly did *(2 Kings 16:9)*. The power of the Syrian-Israelite alliance was broken. In the short run, it appeared that Ahaz had saved Judah.

This action on Ahaz’s part, however, should not come as a surprise. He had been one of the worst kings ever to rule Judah up to that point. *(See 2 Kings 16:3, 4; 2 Chron. 28:2–4.)*

When we read about what Ahaz was like, it is understandable why he reacted to danger as he did. What lesson is here for us on a personal level? If we’re not obeying the Lord now, what makes us think we’ll have the faith to trust Him when real trials come? *(See James 2:22, Jer. 12:5.)*

Attempted Interception *(Isa. 7:3–9)*

While Ahaz was weighing his political options to meet the threat from Israel and Syria, God knew some things he did not. For one thing, it was God who had allowed trouble to come upon him in order to discipline him and bring him to his senses (*2 Chron. 28:5, 19*). Moreover, although appealing to Tiglath-pileser for help seemed logical and attractive from a human standpoint, God knew it would bring the Davidic kingdom of Judah under foreign control from which she could never recover.

The stakes were staggeringly high. So, the Lord sent Isaiah to intercept the king (apparently as he was inspecting Jerusalem's water supply in preparation for a siege) in order to persuade him not to contact the Assyrian leader.

Why did the Lord tell Isaiah to take his son, Shear-jashub, with him? *(Isa. 7:3.)*

Ahaz would be startled when Isaiah greeted him and introduced his son, named "A Remnant Shall Return." Remnant of whom? Shall return from what? Because the boy's father was a prophet, the name sounded like an ominous message from God about people going into captivity. Or was it about returning to God in the sense of repenting (the verb "return" also carries the meaning of repentance)? The message from God to Ahaz was: it means what *you* make it mean! Turn from your sins or go into captivity, and from captivity a remnant will return. The decision is yours!

How did God's message address the king's situation? *(Isa. 7:4–9)*

The threat from Syria and Israel would pass, and Judah would be spared. Powers that looked to Ahaz like huge, fiery volcanoes were in God's sight only "two smoldering stumps of firebrands" (*Isa. 7:4, NRSV*). There was no need for Ahaz to appeal to Assyria for help.

But in order to make the right decision, Ahaz needed to trust the Lord and His promises. He needed to believe in order to be established (*Isa. 7:9*). The words for "believe" and "be established" are from the same Hebrew root, from which come also the word for "truth" (that which is reliable) and the word *amen* (affirming that which is true/reliable). Ahaz needed to be sure in order to be made sure; he needed to rely in order to be reliable.

Look at that last section of Isaiah 7:9. Why are faith and belief so important in order to be "established"? Established in what? How does this principle apply in the life of the Christian?

Another Chance *(Isa. 7:10–13)*

Ahaz did not respond to Isaiah’s call for faith. So, God mercifully gave the king another chance, telling him to ask for a sign that was “deep as Sheol or high as heaven” (*Isa. 7:11, NRSV*). Here is one of the greatest invitations to faith ever given to a human being. Unlike lotteries or sweepstakes, God placed no restrictions in fine print. God did not even limit His offer to the half of His kingdom, as human rulers did when they reached the upper limit of their generosity (*see Esther 5:6, Esther 7:2, Mark 6:23*). He was ready and willing to empty all of heaven and earth for a wicked king if he would only believe! As a sign, Ahaz could have asked for a mountain of gold or soldiers as numerous as grains of sand by the Mediterranean.

Why did Ahaz respond in the way he did? *(Isa. 7:12.)*

At first glance, Ahaz’s answer seems pious and respectful. He would not put God to the test, as the Israelites had centuries before, during their wilderness wanderings (*Exod. 17:2, Deut. 6:16*). But the difference was that God *invited* the king to put Him to the test (*compare Mal. 3:10*). To take Him up on His overwhelmingly generous gift would please Him, not test His patience. But Ahaz was not even willing to allow God to help him to believe. He barred and bolted the door of his heart to shut out faith.

Read Isaiah 7:13. What is Isaiah saying here?

Isaiah pointed out that by refusing to put God to the test, outwardly to avoid wearying God, Ahaz, in fact, wearied God. But the most troubling aspect of this verse is the fact that here Isaiah refers to “my God,” by clear contrast to Isaiah 7:11, where the prophet asked the king to ask a sign of the Lord “your God.” When Ahaz refused the divine offer, he rejected the Lord from being his God. The Lord was the God of Isaiah—but not of Ahaz.

What does this day’s study teach us about God’s forbearance and willingness to bring all of us to salvation? What also does it tell us about the blindness and hardness of the human heart when not surrendered completely to the Lord? In the end, even if God had given Ahaz any sign that he had wanted, do you think Ahaz would then have believed? Explain your answer.

Sign of a Son *(Isa. 7:14)*

An offer of a sign as “deep as Sheol or high as heaven” (*Isa. 7:11, NRSV*) did not move Ahaz. So, when God says He Himself will come up with a sign (*Isa. 7:14*), we expect it to have breathtaking dimensions that only the divine imagination could devise (*compare Isa. 55:9, 1 Cor. 2:9*).

Surprise! The sign is a son. But how could a young woman bearing a child and calling him “Immanuel” be a sign of biblical proportions?

Who is the woman, and who is her Child?

Nowhere does the Old Testament point out a fulfillment of this important sign, as it had done for the signs given to other people, such as Gideon (*Judg. 6:36–40*). So, here are some of the possible fulfillments, based on the Old Testament alone:

1. Because the word for “young woman” refers to a young woman of marriageable age, many assume she is a married woman living in Jerusalem, perhaps the wife of Isaiah. Isaiah 8:3 does record the birth of a son to Isaiah by “the prophetess” (*referring to his wife, whose prophetic messages consisted, at least, of her children; compare Isa. 7:3, Isa. 8:18*). However, this son was named Maher-shalal-hash-baz (*Isa. 8:1–4*), not Immanuel. Nevertheless, the signs of the two boys are similar in that before they reach the stage at which they can choose good or evil, Syria and northern Israel would be devastated (*Isa. 7:16, Isa. 8:4*).

2. Some suggest that Immanuel is Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, who became the next king. But nowhere is the name Immanuel applied to him.

3. Because Immanuel is somewhat mysterious and His name, commonly translated “God with us” refers to God’s presence, He could be the same as the special Son prophesied in Isaiah 9 and 11. If so, His exalted description as divine (*Isa. 9:6*) and “the root of Jesse” (*Isa. 11:10, NRSV*) surpasses anything that could be ascribed to good King Hezekiah.

4. A natural birth to an *unmarried* woman of marriageable age would result in an illegitimate child through illegal promiscuity (*see Deut. 22:20, 21*). Why would God refer to such a child as a sign to inspire faith?

In contrast, the New Testament identifies Jesus as Immanuel (*Matt. 1:21–23*), born miraculously and with purity to an unmarried but betrothed virgin. Jesus also is the divine Son (*Isa. 9:6, Matt. 3:17*) and the “shoot” and “root” of Jesse (*Isa. 11:1, 10; Rev. 22:16*). Perhaps an earlier “Immanuel,” whose development proved to Ahaz the timeliness of prophetic fulfillments, served as a forerunner of Christ. We do not know. But we know what we need to know: “when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman” (*Gal. 4:4, NRSV*), to give us the presence of God with us.

Dwell on the reality of Christ’s coming into humanity. What kind of comfort can this reality give us amid what seems like a cold, fearsome, and uncaring world?

“God Is With Us”! (*Isa. 7:14*)

Like the name of Isaiah’s children (Shear-jashub, “a remnant shall return,” and Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which means “swift is booty, speedy is prey”), the name of Immanuel has a meaning. It is literally “with us God.” But the commonly accepted translation “God with us” misses something important. As with other Hebrew names of this kind that lack verbs, the verb “to be” must be supplied, because it is not expressed in Hebrew. So, Immanuel must be translated “God *is* with us” (*compare the same words in Isa. 8:10*), just as the name “Jesus” (Greek, and short for Hebrew Yehoshua, or Joshua) means “The LORD *is* salvation,” with the verb again being supplied (*compare Isaiah, which means, “salvation of the LORD”*).

But the name “Immanuel” is not just an abstract description; it is an assertion of a promise that is fulfilled now: “God *is* with us”!

What is the significance of the promise that God is with us?

There is no stronger assurance and comfort. God does not promise that His people will not endure hardship and pain, but He promises to be with them. The psalmist says: “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me” (*Ps. 23:4, NRSV*).

“God says: ‘When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you’ (*Isa. 43:2*).

“Where was the Lord when the Babylonians threw Daniel’s three friends into the fire? With them (*Dan. 3:23–25*). And where was the Lord during the time of Jacob’s trouble when he wrestled until daybreak? In Jacob’s arms, as close as he could get (*Gen. 32:24–30*).

“Even when the Lord does not appear in physical form on earth, He goes through the experiences of His people with them. Where was the Lord when the mob condemned Stephen? ‘Standing at the right hand of God’ (*Acts 7:55*). But when Jesus ascended to heaven, He ‘sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high’ (*Heb. 1:3*). Why did He stand when Stephen was in trouble, about to be stoned to death? As Morris Venden has said, ‘Jesus wasn’t going to take that sitting down!’ ”—Roy Gane, *God’s Faulty Heroes* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1996), p. 66.

Even though we have the promise that “God is with us,” what difference does that make if we still face terrible trials and suffering? What good does the knowledge of His presence, then, do for us? Explain your answer.

Further Thought: “ ‘His name shall be called Immanuel, . . . God with us.’ ‘The light of the knowledge of the glory of God’ is seen ‘in the face of Jesus Christ.’ From the days of eternity the Lord Jesus Christ was one with the Father; He was ‘the image of God,’ the image of His greatness and majesty, ‘the outshining of His glory.’ It was to manifest this glory that He came to our world. To this sin-darkened earth He came to reveal the light of God’s love,—to be ‘God with us.’ Therefore it was prophesied of Him, ‘His name shall be called Immanuel.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 19.

“Well would it have been for the kingdom of Judah had Ahaz received this message as from heaven. But choosing to lean on the arm of flesh, he sought help from the heathen. In desperation he sent word to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria: ‘I am thy servant and thy son: come up, and save me out of the hand of the king of Syria, and out of the hand of the king of Israel, which rise up against me.’ 2 Kings 16:7. The request was accompanied by a rich present from the king’s treasure and from the temple storehouse.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 329.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 When you are in the process of making a decision, is it appropriate to ask God for a sign? What dangers are possibly inherent in doing something like that?
- 2 It is good to have human assistance, but how do you recognize its limits?
- 3 Russian author Leo Tolstoy wrote to a friend that “once a man has realized that death is the end of everything, then there is nothing worse than life either.” How does our knowledge that “God is with us” answer such a statement?

Summary: God brought faithless King Ahaz to circumstances in which he had to make a difficult decision: To believe or not to believe, this is the question. Even though the Lord offered him any sign that his imagination could devise, he refused to allow God to demonstrate a reason why he should believe. Instead, he chose as his “friend” the king of Assyria.

Floating Red Book

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Toroni Kumar Tripura was thrilled to receive a Bible with a beautiful red cover in his remote village in southeast Bangladesh. The Bible arrived as a reward for completing a series of Bible lessons by mail.

But Toroni had to be careful.

His father served as a priest in the family's traditional religion, and he would not be pleased that his son had a Bible about the God of heaven.

Toroni, however, wasn't worried. He had studied the Bible lessons every night while his parents slept, and he also intended to read the red Bible at night.

The plan seemed to work.

Toroni tended Father's cows during the day and, after returning home at night, waited until his parents were asleep to eagerly switch on a tiny flashlight and read about God.

One night Father caught Toroni reading the Bible. He was furious. After his son left the house the next day, he seized the red Bible and threw it into the muddy waters of the Chenggi River.

Toroni was distraught when he realized that his red Bible was missing. He quickly understood what had happened.

What could he do? He couldn't afford to buy another Bible. The correspondence school probably wouldn't send him a second Bible. But he longed to read more about God.

Some time passed. One afternoon Toroni was swimming in the Chenggi River when he saw something floating on the water. He had seen plastic bottles and other garbage in the river, but this looked different.

He swam closer.

Reaching out, he grabbed the object with his hand and hastily swam to shore. Climbing onto the riverbank, he raised his hand to see a dripping red Bible.

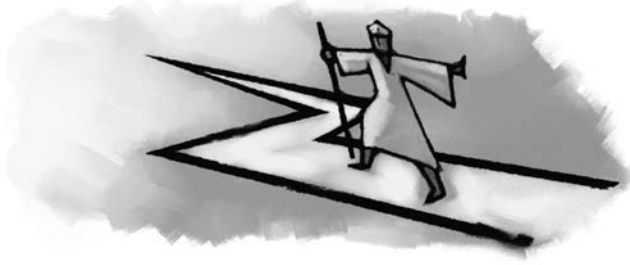
He couldn't believe it. It was his missing Bible.

Toroni placed the book on the grass in the hot sun to dry. It took 14 days to dry the Bible, and then he began to read it again. As he read, he fell in love with God.

Even though he risked angering his father, he couldn't keep the newfound love to himself. He told other villagers about the God of the red Bible that wouldn't sink in the river. The astounded villagers asked to know more. Today most of the villagers, including many of Toroni's relatives, worship the God of the red Bible.



The Hard Way



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 7:14–16, Isa. 7:17–25, Isa. 8:1–10, Isa. 8:11–15, Isa. 8:16–22.*

Memory Text: “I will wait on the LORD, who hides His face from the house of Jacob; and I will hope in Him” (*Isaiah 8:17, NKJV*).

At a burning building in New York City's Harlem, a blind girl was perched on a fourth-floor window. The firemen had become desperate. They couldn't fit the ladder truck between the buildings, and they couldn't get her to jump into a net, which she, of course, couldn't see.

“Finally her father arrived and shouted through the bull horn that there was a net and that she was to jump on his command. The girl jumped and was so completely relaxed that she did not break a bone or even strain a muscle in the four-story fall. Because she trusted her father completely, when she heard her father's voice she did what he said was best.”—Edited by Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, p. 135.

In the same way, God provided powerful evidence that He wanted the best for His children, but they rejected the gently flowing way He first presented to them; thus, He had to speak to them with a roar and a flood instead.

* *Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 23.*

Prophecy Fulfilled *(Isa. 7:14–16)*

In Isaiah 7:14–16, Immanuel is a sign linked to the specific dilemma of Ahaz: before the child Immanuel would be old enough to decide between different kinds of food, “the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted” (*Isa. 7:16, NRSV*). This refers to the land and kings of Syria and northern Israel (*see Isa. 7:1, 2, 4–9*) and reiterates God’s promise that their power would soon be extinguished.

Why does Isaiah mention “ ‘curds and honey’ ” (*NRSV*) that the boy would have to eat? (*Isa. 7:15.*)

The crops and fields of Judah would be destroyed by the Assyrians (*Isa. 7:23–25*). So, the people, including the Old Testament Immanuel, whoever he was (*Isa. 7:14, 15*), would be forced to return to the diet of nomads (*Isa. 7:21, 22*). But while they would be poor, they would have enough on which to survive.

When was the prophecy regarding Syria and northern Israel fulfilled? (*2 Kings 15:29, 30; 2 Kings 16:7–9; 1 Chron. 5:6, 26.*)

This prophecy of Isaiah was given about 734 B.C. In response to the bribe of Ahaz, Tiglath-pileser III did what he probably would have done anyway: he smashed the northern coalition, conquered the Galilee and Transjordanian regions of northern Israel, deported some of the population, and turned the territories into Assyrian provinces (734–733 B.C.). The remainder of Israel was saved when Hoshea, after murdering King Pekah, surrendered and paid tribute. In 733 and 732 B.C. Tiglath-pileser conquered Damascus, the capital of Syria. Then he made Syria into Assyrian provinces. So, by 732, within about two years of Isaiah’s prediction, Syria and Israel had been conclusively defeated, and it was all over for the two kings who had threatened Ahaz.

Soon after Shalmaneser V replaced Tiglath-pileser III in 727 B.C., King Hoshea of Israel committed political suicide by rebelling against Assyria. The Assyrians took the capital city of Samaria in 722 B.C. and deported thousands of Israelites to Mesopotamia and Media, where they were absorbed into the local populations eventually and lost their identity (*see Isa. 7:8—within 65 years Ephraim would no longer even be a people*). God had predicted what would happen to the enemies of Judah, but His point to Ahaz was that this would happen anyway, without any need to rely on Assyria.

Think, if you were living in the northern kingdom while all this was happening, how easy it would be to lose faith. What can we do to learn to keep our faith intact, so that when tomorrow’s calamities come, we can stay firm? (*See 1 Pet. 1:13–25.*)

Foreseen Consequences *(Isa. 7:17–25)*

Read the above verses. What is the Lord describing that will happen to the land? Why should we not be surprised at this outcome?

“Invitation upon invitation was sent to erring Israel to return to their allegiance to Jehovah. Tender were the pleadings of the prophets; and as they stood before the people, earnestly exhorting to repentance and reformation, their words bore fruit to the glory of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 325.

Thus, for Ahaz, the man of fear rather than faith, the good news from God was that Syria and Israel would be wiped out. The bad news was that Assyria, the ally and “friend” he had chosen to help him, would turn out to be a far more dangerous foe than Syria and Israel had been. By turning down God’s freely offered deliverance, Ahaz was guaranteed defeat. If Ahaz thought his world was falling apart now, things were only going to get worse!

“It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to put confidence in princes” (*Ps. 118:9, NRSV*). How could Ahaz trust that Tiglath-pileser III would be satisfied with taking the countries to the north and would respect Judah? Assyrian writings, such as annals of the Assyrian kings themselves, testify to the fact that their desire for power was insatiable.

Read 2 Kings 16:10–18 and 2 Chronicles 28:20–25. What was happening to Ahaz? What spiritual principle do we see unfolding here? Why should we not be surprised at his actions?

Second Chronicles 28:20–23 powerfully sums up what resulted from Ahaz’s asking for help from Assyria rather than relying on the Lord.

Our natural tendency is to trust in what we can see, feel, taste, touch—the things of the world. Yet, as we know, the things of the world vanish. Look at 2 Corinthians 4:18. What is the text saying to us? How can we apply its message to our own lives? And what difference will it make for us if we do?

What's in a Name? *(Isa. 8:1–10)*

Can you imagine playing a ball game with Isaiah's second boy? By the time you could say "Maher-shalal-hash-baz, throw me the ball!" it would be too late. But even longer than his name is its meaning: "swift is booty, speedy is prey" or "speed the spoil, hasten the plunder."

The message of the name clearly has to do with rapid conquest, but who conquers whom? *(Isa. 8:4.)*

Isaiah 8:1–10 reinforces the message of chapter 7. Before a child could reach a certain stage, spoils of war from the capitals of Syria and northern Israel would be taken by Assyria. Furthermore, because Judah had refused God's message of assurance, represented by the gently flowing waters of the Shiloah stream in Jerusalem, it would be overwhelmed by the mighty power of Assyria, represented by flooding from the great Euphrates River.

Because Ahaz turned to Assyria, the names of Isaiah's sons referred to Judah, as well as to northern Israel: "swift is booty, speedy is prey," but "a remnant shall return." Why was there still hope? Because although Assyria would fill Immanuel's land (*Isa. 8:8*), they still had the promise that "God is with us" (*Isa. 8:10*). Indeed, what we see here is a theme that permeates the entire book of Isaiah, which is though there would be judgments on God's enemies in Judah and other nations, delivered in the form of military disasters, suffering, and exile, the Lord would be with the faithful survivors of His people and restore them to their land.

Why does Isaiah tell us he legally recorded the child's name and had marital relations with his wife ("the prophetess")? *(Isa. 8:1–3.)*

The timing of this son was central to his significance as a sign. As with the sign of Immanuel, from the time he was conceived and born to the time Assyria defeated Syria and Israel there would be less time than it would take for the boy to reach an early developmental stage, in this case calling for his father or mother (*Isa. 8:4*). When Isaiah legally recorded the boy's name even before his conception, he made the child and his name a public prophecy that could be tested by subsequent events.

Despite repeated mistakes on the part of His professed people, the Lord was still willing to save them. How can we take this principle and apply it to ourselves personally, especially when we fail and fall in our own spiritual life?

Nothing to Fear When We Fear God Himself *(Isa. 8:11–15)*

In his first inaugural address, on March 4, 1933, American President Franklin D. Roosevelt told a nation disheartened by the Great Depression, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Isaiah’s message to depressed people is: we have nothing to fear when we fear God Himself.

God warned Isaiah not to fear what his people feared, but to fear Him *(Isa. 8:12, 13)*. This is an important theme in Scripture. For example, in Revelation 14:6–12, three angels proclaim a worldwide message: Fear God and give glory to Him, rather than fearing and giving glory to the earthly beast power described in Revelation 13.

How do you understand the idea of “fearing” God? What does that mean, especially in light of the command for us to love God, as well *(Matt. 22:37)*?

True fear of God as holy means that you recognize Him as the ultimate power in the universe. Such fear overcomes any other fear. If He is for you, nobody else can touch you without His permission. If He is against you because you have rebelled against Him, you can run, but you can’t hide!

Doesn’t the idea that we should fear God contradict 1 John 4:18? “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love” *(NRSV)*.

There are different kinds of fear. If someone with awesome power is your friend, with whom you share mutual love, you do not fear that person in the sense you think he or she will hurt you. But you have a kind of fear in the sense that you know and respect the power of that person and the boundaries of your relationship.

As Christians we aren’t to love the things of the world, the things people of the world themselves love *(1 John 2:15)*. Thinking, then, along parallel lines, as Christians, are there things the world fears that we as Christians shouldn’t fear? If so, what are they, and why shouldn’t we fear them? At the same time, what things does the world not fear that we Christians should? *(See, for instance, Matt. 10:28; Jer. 10:2, 3.)*

Gloom of the Ungrateful Living Dead

(Isa. 8:16–22)

Read the above passage. What is it talking about? What has this to do with King Ahaz? Summarize the ideas.

Ahaz was deeply involved in pagan religion (*2 Kings 16:3, 4, 10–15; 2 Chron. 28:2–4, 23–25*), which was heavily interconnected with the occult (*compare Deut. 32:17, NRSV; “They sacrifice to demons,” 1 Cor. 10:20*). Various aspects of modern witchcraft have striking parallels in ancient Near Eastern rituals, as witnessed by ancient writings outside the Bible. Indeed, even many of today’s New Age practices are simply contemporary manifestations of these ancient occult practices.

Isaiah’s description of despair resulting from reliance on spirits other than the Lord (*Isa. 8:21, 22*) fits Ahaz well (*compare 2 Chron. 28:22, 23*). Isaiah refers to people becoming enraged and cursing their king (*Isa. 8:21*). This would warn Ahaz that because he led the people into the occult, they would curse him. In fact, when Ahaz died, an exception was made regarding his burial due to lack of respect for him: “they did not bring him into the tombs of the kings of Israel” (*2 Chron. 28:27, NRSV*).

What do these texts say about the occult? (*Lev. 20:27, Deut. 18:9–14*.)

Separation from the occult is a matter of loyalty to God. First Chronicles 10:13, 14 applies this principle to the case of King Saul: “So Saul died for his unfaithfulness; he was unfaithful to the LORD in that he did not keep the command of the LORD; moreover, he had consulted a medium, seeking guidance, and did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse” (*NRSV*).

Look around at your own life, at the influences around you. In what subtle ways are you exposed to the principles behind the occult and various manifestations of spiritualism? And even if you can’t totally avoid them, what can you do to minimize their influence upon you, or your family?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Can Our Dead Speak to Us?” pp. 551–562, in *The Great Controversy*.

“In the days of the Hebrews there was a class of people who claimed, as do the spiritualists of today, to hold communication with the dead. But the ‘familiar spirits,’ as these visitants from other worlds were called, are declared by the Bible to be ‘the spirits of devils.’ (*Compare Numbers 25:1–3; Psalm 106:28; 1 Corinthians 10:20; Revelation 16:14.*) The work of dealing with familiar spirits was pronounced an abomination to the Lord, and was solemnly forbidden under penalty of death. Leviticus 19:31; [Leviticus] 20:27. The very name of witchcraft is now held in contempt. The claim that men can hold intercourse with evil spirits is regarded as a fable of the Dark Ages. But spiritualism, which numbers its converts by hundreds of thousands, yea, by millions, which has made its way into scientific circles, which has invaded churches, and has found favor in legislative bodies, and even in the courts of kings—this mammoth deception is but a revival, in a new disguise, of the witchcraft condemned and prohibited of old.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 556.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Discuss the issue of spiritualism as it appears in movies, books, TV, and popular culture. If nothing can be done to stop it, how can we alert others to the dangers of what, for so many people, seem like harmless distractions, nothing more? Why is a proper understanding of the state of the dead so important in being protected against these deceptions?
- 2 Read Isaiah 8:20. Rephrase it in your own words. Let different people in the class read their versions aloud. What is the Lord telling us here?
- 3 Dwell more on this idea of loving and fearing God at the same time. In what ways does our love stem from that fear? Or does our fear stem from our love? Discuss.

Summary: Through Isaiah’s actions and family, as well as his words, God reinforced the message of warning and hope: the only safe course is to trust that God knows what He is doing. He has both the love and the power to guide, protect, and provide for those who let Him. For those who turn to other powers, there is only gloom.

Timely Lesson

By GODWIN K. LEKUNDAYO

God taught me about heaven's understanding of time when, as a district pastor, I led a three-week evangelistic series in my homeland, Tanzania.

Local organizers chose the dry season for the meetings in Moshi, a city at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro. But heavy rains started to fall after the first week. Worried that the rain would keep people at home, I suggested that we reschedule the meetings for later.

To my surprise, the chairman of the local evangelistic committee, a lay person, refused.

"No, pastor, we are not going to postpone," he said. "We have been praying about these meetings, and our Lord heard our prayers and knew the rain would fall."

"So, what shall we do?" I said. "You can see that it is raining heavily."

"We have to have a little faith to believe that our God can be sensitive about the time of the meetings," he said. "Let us pray this way, 'Our good Lord, You can allow the rains to fall as much as You wish, but let there be no rain from 3:30 P.M. to 6:30 P.M.' This way people will have 30 minutes to travel to the 4:00 P.M. meetings and 30 minutes to return home after the meetings end at 6:00 P.M."

I wasn't sure about such a request, but I joined in the prayer.

The next morning, the rain fell in torrents. The downpour continued into the afternoon. But exactly at 3:30 P.M., it stopped. Our meeting started at 4:00 P.M., and I preached until 6:00 P.M. The rain started again at 6:30 P.M.

The weather followed this schedule for two weeks. Rain poured down until 3:30 P.M., stopped, and then started again at 6:30 P.M.

One day, a visitor arrived at the meeting site at 3:00 P.M. to get a good seat. He waited for some time and, seeing the heavy downpour, decided that the meeting would be canceled and left. The next day he asked whether we had met.

"Of course," I replied. "We didn't ask God to stop the rain at 3:00 P.M. We asked for 3:30 P.M., so you should have been sensitive about that."

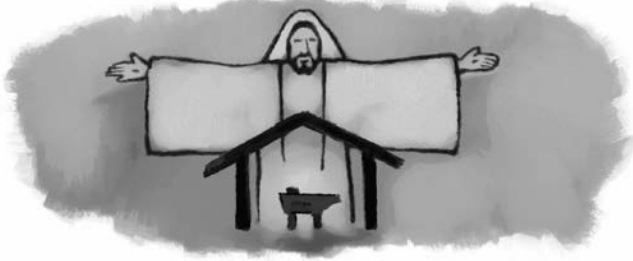
"I'll never make that mistake again," the man said.

On the last Sabbath, I baptized 12 people in a river. As I brought the last person out of the water, the rain started to fall.



The experience taught me that God is sensitive to time. While God may not face time constraints as we do, He does expect us to be sensitive to time, too, and to be good stewards of time. Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:15, 16, "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time" (*NKJV*).

Noble Prince of Peace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 9:1–5; Isa. 9:6, 7; Isa. 9:8–10:34; Isaiah 11; Isa. 12:1–6.*

Memory Text: “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (*Isaiah 9:6, NKJV*).

Dr. Robert Oppenheimer, who supervised the creation of the first atomic bomb, appeared before a U.S. Congressional Committee. They inquired of him if there were any defense against the weapon. “Certainly,” the great physicist replied.

“And that is—”

“Dr. Oppenheimer looked over the . . . audience and said softly: ‘Peace.’ ”—Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,000 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Rockville, MD: Assurance Publishers, 1985), p. 989.

Peace is an elusive dream for the human race. It has been estimated that since the beginning of recorded history the world has been entirely at peace only about 8 percent of the time. During these years, at least 8,000 treaties have been broken. During the half century following the end of World War I, which was supposed to be the *war to end all wars*, there were two minutes of peace for every year of war.

In 1895 Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, provided a trust to establish a prize for individuals who make an outstanding contribution to peace. However, even some winners of the Nobel Peace Prize have been involved in violent conflict.

This week, we’ll read about the only One who brings true, everlasting peace.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 30.

End of Gloom for Galilee *(Isa. 9:1–5)*

Why does Isaiah 9:1 begin with a word (*But/Nevertheless*) that indicates a contrast to what precedes it?

Isaiah 8:21, 22 describes the hopeless condition of those who turn to the occult rather than to the true God: wherever they look, they will “see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness” (*Isa. 8:22, NRSV*). By contrast, there will come a time when “there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish” (*Isa. 9:1, NRSV*). The people of the Galilee region are singled out here as receiving the special blessing of “a great light” (*Isa. 9:2, NRSV*). The nation will be multiplied and rejoice because God will have broken “the rod of their oppressor” (*Isa. 9:4, NRSV*).

The region of Lake Galilee is depicted here because it was among the first territories of Israel to be conquered. In response to Ahaz’s request for aid, Tiglath-pileser III took the Galilee and Transjordanian regions of northern Israel, carried some of the people captive, and turned the territories into Assyrian provinces (*2 Kings 15:29*). So, Isaiah’s message is that the first to be conquered would be the first to see deliverance.

Whom does God use to deliver His people? (*Isa. 9:6, 7.*)

When and how was the prophecy of Isaiah 9:1–5 fulfilled? (*Matt. 4:12–25.*)

Not by accident, Jesus’ early ministry was in the Galilee region, where He gave hope by announcing the good news of God’s kingdom and by healing people, including delivering demoniacs from bondage to the occult (*Matt. 4:24*).

Here is where we see a perfect example of how the Bible takes events that happened in Old Testament times and uses them to prefigure things that will happen in New Testament times. The Lord mixed images from one era with those of another, such as in Matthew 24, when Jesus mingled the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 with the destruction at the end of the world.

If someone were to ask you, What has Jesus delivered you from, what would you answer? What personal testimony can you give regarding the power of Christ in your life?

A Child for Us *(Isa. 9:6, 7)*

Here is the third special birth in the book of Isaiah, following mentions of the births of Immanuel and Maher-shalal-hash-baz.

What is special about the Child found in these verses? *(Isaiah 9:6, 7)*

Notice that this Deliverer has several names/epithets that describe Him in various ways. In the ancient Near East, kings and deities had multiple names to show their greatness.

He is “wonderful,” just as the divine Angel of the Lord described His own name to Samson’s father as “ ‘wonderful’ ” (*Judg. 13:18, RSV; the same Hebrew root*) and then ascended toward heaven in the sacrificial flame on Manoah’s altar (*Judg. 13:20*), thereby prefiguring His offering of Himself more than one thousand years later.

He is referred to as divine (“Mighty God”) and the eternal Creator (“*Everlasting Father*”; see *Luke 3:38: “Adam, son of God,” NRSV*).

He is a King of the dynasty of David; His kingdom of peace will be eternal.

Given these attributes, whom alone could this Child be? *(See Luke 2:8–14.)*

Some have attempted to identify Him with King Hezekiah, but the description far surpasses any ordinary human being. Only one person fits: Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God and Creator (*John 1:1–3, 14; Col. 1:5–17; Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:2*), who was born to us in order to save us and give us peace. He has received all authority in heaven and on earth, and He is with us always (*Matt. 28:18–20*). While retaining His divinity, He also has become human for all time, ever able to sympathize with our weaknesses (*Heb. 4:15*). “Unto us a child is born” . . . forever!

“When Christ came to our world, Satan was on the ground, and disputed every inch of advance in His path from the manger to Calvary. Satan had accused God of requiring self-denial of the angels, when He knew nothing of what it meant Himself, and when He would not Himself make any self-sacrifice for others. This was the accusation that Satan made against God in heaven; and after the evil one was expelled from heaven, he continually charged the Lord with exacting service which He would not render Himself. Christ came to the world to meet these false accusations, and to reveal the Father.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 406, 407.

What does this quote tell us about the character of God?

The Rod of God's Anger *(Isa. 9:8–10:34)*

This section explains Isaiah 9:1–5, which predicts deliverance for the gloomy, anguished people who had trusted in the occult and fallen prey to military conquest and oppression: “the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian” (*Isa. 9:4, NRSV*).

Read through the sufferings of God's people as shown in the above texts. Compare the curses in *Leviticus 26:14–39*. Why did God punish His people in stages rather than all at once? What does this indicate about His character and goals?

If God had wanted to destroy His people, He could have given them up to the Assyrians right away. But He is patient, “not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (*2 Pet. 3:9, NRSV*). As in the period of the “judges,” God let the people of Judah and Israel experience some results of their folly so they could understand what they were doing and have a chance to make a better choice. When they persisted in evil and hardened their hearts against Him and the appeals He sent through His messengers, He further withdrew His protection. But they continued to rebel. This cycle was repeated in a downward spiral until there was nothing more God could do.

Read through *Isaiah 9:8–10:2*. What sins are the people guilty of? Against whom have they committed them? Who is guilty among them?

What we see here, as seen all through the Bible, is the reality of free will. God made humans free (He had to; otherwise, we could never truly love Him), and freedom involves the option to do wrong. And though time and again God seeks to woo us by revealing His love and character, He also will allow us to face the fruit of our wrong decisions; pain, suffering, fear, turmoil, and so forth, all in order to help us realize just what turning away from Him leads to. And yet, even then, how often these things don't make people put away sin and come to the Lord. Free will is wonderful; we couldn't be human without it. Woe to those, however, who use it wrongly.

How has God used suffering in your own life to turn you away from a wrong course?

Root and Branch in One *(Isaiah 11)*

Who is the “shoot” that comes out “from the stump of Jesse” (*NRSV*) in **Isaiah 11:1**? (See also *Zech. 3:8*; *Zech. 6:12*.)

Isaiah 11:1 picks up on the imagery of a felled tree in 10:33, 34. The “stump of Jesse” represents the idea that the dynasty of David (son of Jesse) would lose its power (*Dan. 4:10–17, 20–26*). But there would arise a “shoot/branch” from the apparently doomed “stump”; that is, a Ruler descended from David.

Why is the new Davidic ruler also called the “root of Jesse”? (*Isa. 11:10*.) What sense does this make? (*Rev. 22:16*.)

The description fits only Jesus Christ, who is both “the root and the descendant of David” (*Rev. 22:16, NRSV*). Christ came from the line of David (*Luke 3:23–31*), who was descended from Adam, who was the “son of God” (*Luke 3:38*) in the sense that Christ created him (see *John 1:1–3, 14*). So, Christ was David’s ancestor, as well as his descendant!

In what ways does the new Davidic Ruler reverse the evil effects of sin and apostasy? (*Isaiah 11*.)

He thinks and acts in harmony with the Lord, judges fairly, punishes the wicked, and brings peace. When He takes over, the Lord will bring back, restore, and unite a faithful remnant of Israel and Judah (*compare Isa. 10:20–22*). There will be a strong, united monarchy as in the days of King David, who defeated the Philistines and other peoples. But the new Ruler will be greater than David in that He will restore peace even to the essence of creation itself: predators will no longer be carnivorous, and they will coexist in tranquility with their former prey (*Isa. 11:6–9*).

Is Isaiah 11 talking about just the first coming of Christ, just the second, or both? Look through the prophecy and mark down which texts talk about which coming.

In Isaiah 11, both comings of Jesus are presented as one picture. They are tied together, because they are two parts of a whole, like the two sides of a flat plane. The plan of salvation, to be completed, requires both Comings: the First, which already has happened; and the Second, which we await as the consummation of all our hopes as Christians.

What did Christ accomplish at the First Coming that gives us such assurance about the Second Coming? What is the purpose of the First Coming if it doesn’t result in the Second?

“You Comforted Me” (*Isa. 12:1–6*)

Isaiah 12 is a short psalm (song) of praise to God for His merciful and powerful comfort. The psalm, put in the mouth of a member of the restored remnant, compares the promised deliverance to that of the Hebrews in the Exodus from Egypt (*see Isa. 11:16*); it is like the song of Moses and the Israelites when they were saved from Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea (*see Exodus 15*).

Compare this song in Isaiah 12 to Revelation 15:2–4, the song of Moses and of the Lamb. What are they both praising God for?

Isaiah 12:2 comes close to identifying the coming Deliverer as Jesus. It says that “God is my salvation” and “he has become my salvation” (*NRSV*). The name Jesus means “The LORD is Salvation” (*compare Matt. 1:21*).

What is the significance of the idea, contained in the name of Jesus, that the Lord *is* salvation?

Not only does the Lord *bestow* salvation (*Isa. 12:2*) but He Himself also *is* salvation. The Presence of the Holy One of Israel in our midst (*Isa. 12:6*) is everything to us. God is with us! Not only did Jesus *do* miracles but He also “*became* flesh and lived among us” (*John 1:14, NRSV, emphasis supplied*). Not only did He bear our sins on the cross, but He also *became* sin for us (*2 Cor. 5:21*). Not only does He make peace, but He also *is* our peace (*Eph. 2:14*).

No wonder “the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples” (*Isa. 11:10, NRSV*). When He is lifted up on the cross, He draws all people to Himself (*John 12:32, 33*)! A remnant shall return to the “mighty God” (*Isa. 10:21, NRSV*), who is the Child born for us, the “Prince of Peace” (*Isa. 9:6*)!

Dwell more on this idea that Jesus *is* our salvation. Read Romans 3:24. It says that redemption is in Jesus; redemption is something that happened in Him, and it is through God’s grace and mercy that we can have an eternal share in that redemption, as well. In other words, that redemption that was *in Him* can become ours by faith, and not by works, because no works we do are good enough to redeem us. Only the works that Christ did, which He credits to us by faith, can bring redemption. How does this truth give you hope and assurance of salvation, especially when you feel overwhelmed by your own sense of unworthiness?

Further Thought: “The heart of the human father yearns over his son. He looks into the face of his little child, and trembles at the thought of life’s peril. He longs to shield his dear one from Satan’s power, to hold him back from temptation and conflict. To meet a bitterer conflict and a more fearful risk, God gave His only-begotten Son, that the path of life might be made sure for our little ones. ‘Herein is love.’ Wonder, O heavens! and be astonished, O earth!”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 49.

“Christ was the one who consented to meet the conditions necessary for man’s salvation. No angel, no man, was sufficient for the great work to be wrought. The Son of man alone must be lifted up; for only an infinite nature could undertake the redemptive process. Christ consented to connect himself with the disloyal and sinful, to partake of the nature of man, to give his own blood, and to make his soul an offering for sin. In the counsels of heaven, the guilt of man was measured, the wrath for sin was estimated, and yet Christ announced his decision that he would take upon himself the responsibility of meeting the conditions whereby hope should be extended to a fallen race.”—Ellen G. White, *The Signs of the Times*, March 5, 1896.

Discussion Question:

As we saw in Isaiah 11, the Lord presented both comings of Christ in one picture. This can help explain, at least somewhat, why some of the Jews didn’t accept Christ at His first coming, because they expected Him to do the things that will happen only at the Second Coming. What does this tell us about how important it is that we have a proper understanding of the nature of Christ’s advent? How can false views, for instance, of His second coming set people up for Satan’s great end-time deception? (See Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, chapter 39.)

Summary: In the days of Isaiah, whose name means “Salvation of the LORD,” God promised His remnant people salvation from the oppression that was coming upon them as a result of national apostasy. This prophecy of hope finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, whose name means “The LORD is Salvation.”

Three Lost Boys

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Marta Aguirre, a nurse, and her physician husband, Luis Arboine, were enjoying Mexican Independence Day celebrations on the central town square when a former patient interrupted their conversation.

“Marta, I want to talk to you,” said the elderly woman, Grandmother Ana.

She explained that her son-in-law had died seven days earlier at the age of 33 after a heart attack. Her daughter had been in prison for the past eight years. That left her with three grandsons ages 10, 9, and 7. She wasn’t working, and she couldn’t take care of them. Moreover, the boys were sad and crying.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said.

Marta also wasn’t sure, and she spoke with the church pastor. He advised inviting the brothers to a special horse-themed children’s Week of Prayer. The program, called “Jesus, Take the Rope of My Life,” would start in two weeks.

Grandmother Ana readily agreed to send her grandsons to the evening meetings. The eldest grandson, 10-year-old Juan, initially didn’t want to go because he had never been inside a church. The middle grandson, nine-year-old Luis, had not heard about God before, and he wanted to learn more. He cried when he heard about Jesus dying for his sins. He remembered his own father’s death. The youngest boy, seven-year-old Francisco, slept a lot at first.

Soon the boys couldn’t wait to go to the meetings. Grandmother Ana saw the boys wearing new clothes from the church members, and she thought that they wanted to go to receive more gifts. To her surprise, she found out that they didn’t care about the clothes. They wanted to learn about Jesus.

The boys fell in love with Jesus during the Week of Prayer and attended church every Sabbath after it ended. Marta began to give children’s Bible studies to the boys every Sabbath afternoon.

Six months later, the pastor invited the boys to an Adventurer campout. The boys loved the morning and evening worships. At one worship, a nine-year-old disabled boy gave a personal testimony and announced that he wanted to be baptized. Luis was touched by the story and decided that he also wanted to give his heart to Jesus. When he told his brothers, they also declared that they wanted to be baptized. The church was packed for the special day.

Today the boys are 15, 13, and 12 and run the church’s audiovisual system on Sabbaths. Luis has preached six sermons and hopes to become a pastor. “The boys are totally different children than who they were when I asked for help on Independence Day five years ago,” Grandmother Ana said. “I thank Marta and her husband, Luis.”



Luis, however, said all credit goes to the Holy Spirit.

—“It is the Holy Spirit who does the work,” he said.

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Playing God



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Isaiah 13, Isa. 13:2–22, Isaiah 14, Isaiah 24–27.*

Memory Text: “ ‘Behold, this is our God; we have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for Him; we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.’ ” (*Isaiah 25:9, NKJV*).

After a minister had preached a searching sermon on pride, a woman who had heard the sermon waited for him and told him that she was in much distress of mind, and that she would like to confess a great sin. The minister asked her what the sin was.

“She answered, ‘The sin of pride, for I sat for an hour before my mirror some days ago admiring my beauty.’

“ ‘Oh,’ responded the minister, ‘that was not a sin of pride—that was a sin of imagination!’ ”—C. E. Macartney, compiled by Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*, p. 1100.

Ever since sin was born in the heart of a mighty angel, pride has not respected the boundaries of reality (in angels or people). Nowhere is this problem seen worse than in those who harbor spiritual pride, a rather sorry trait in beings so corrupted that their salvation can be found only in the works of another in their behalf.

This week, among other things, we’ll take a look at the origin of pride and self-exaltation.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 6.

Doom on the Nations *(Isaiah 13)*

Isaiah 13:1 has a heading that names Isaiah as the author (*compare Isa. 1:1, Isa. 2:1*); it seems, also, to begin a new section of his book. Chapters 13–23 contain oracles of judgment against various nations. Let's take a look.

Why do the prophecies against the nations begin with Babylon?

Isaiah 10:5–34 already had announced judgment against Assyria, which posed the greatest danger in Isaiah's day. While Isaiah 14:24–27 briefly reiterates the Lord's plan to break Assyria, chapters 13–23 deal mainly with other threats, Babylon being the most important.

Endowed with a rich and ancient cultural, religious, and political legacy, Babylon later emerged as the superpower that conquered and exiled Judah. But from the human perspective of Isaiah's time, it would not have been readily apparent that Babylon would threaten God's people. During much of Isaiah's ministry, Assyria dominated Babylon. From 728 B.C., when Tiglath-pileser III took Babylon and was proclaimed king of Babylon under the throne name Pulu (*or Pul*; see *2 Kings 15:19, 1 Chron. 5:26*), Assyrian kings retook Babylon several times (710 B.C., 702 B.C., 689 B.C., and 648 B.C.). Babylon, however, eventually would become the great superpower in the region, the power that would destroy the Judean kingdom.

Read through Isaiah 13. Notice how strong the language is. Why does a loving God do these things, or allow these things to happen? Certainly some innocent people will suffer, as well, wouldn't they? (*Isa. 13:16*.) How do we understand this action by God? What should these texts, and all the texts in the Bible that talk about God's anger and wrath against sin and evil, tell us about the egregious nature of sin and evil? Isn't the mere fact that a God of love would respond this way enough evidence to show us just how bad sin is? We have to remember that this is Jesus speaking these warnings through Isaiah, the same Jesus who forgave, healed, pleaded with, and admonished sinners to repent. In your own mind, how have you come to understand this aspect of a loving God's character? Ask yourself this question, as well: Could not this wrath actually stem from His love? If so, how so? Or, look at it from another perspective, that of the Cross, where Jesus Himself, bearing the sins of the world, suffered worse than anyone else ever has suffered, even those "innocents" who suffered because of the sins of the nation. How does the suffering of Christ on the cross help answer these difficult questions?

The Late Great City of Babylon *(Isa. 13:2–22)*

In 626 B.C. the Chaldaean Nabopolassar restored Babylonian glory by making himself king in Babylon, beginning the Neo-Babylonian dynasty, and participating (with Media) in the defeat of Assyria. His son, Nebuchadnezzar II, was the king who conquered and exiled Judah.

How did the city of Babylon finally end? *(See Daniel 5.)*

In 539 B.C., when Cyrus the Persian captured Babylon for the Medo-Persian Empire *(see Daniel 5)*, the city lost its independence forever. In 482 B.C., Xerxes I brutally suppressed a revolt of Babylon against Persian rule. He removed the statue of Marduk, the chief god, and apparently damaged some fortifications and temples.

Alexander the Great took Babylon from the Persians in 331 B.C. without a fight. In spite of his short-lived dream to make Babylon his eastern capital, the city declined over several centuries. By A.D. 198 the Roman, Septimus Severus, found Babylon completely deserted. So, the great city came to an end through abandonment. Today some Iraqi villagers live on parts of the ancient site, but they have not rebuilt the city as such.

The doom of Babylon, described in Isaiah 13, liberates the descendants of Jacob, who have been oppressed by Babylon *(Isa. 14:1–3)*. The event that accomplished this was the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 B.C. Although he did not destroy the city, this was the beginning of the end for Babylon, and it never threatened God's people again.

Isaiah 13 dramatizes the fall of Babylon as a divine judgment. The warriors who take the city are God's agents *(Isa. 13:2–5)*. The time of judgment is called "the day of the LORD" *(Isa. 13:6, 9)*, and God's anger is so powerful it affects the stars, sun, moon, heavens, and earth *(Isa. 13:10, 13)*.

Compare Judges 5, where the song of Deborah and Barak describes the Lord as going forth with quaking of the earth and with rain from the heavens *(Judg. 5:4)*. Judges 5:20, 21 depicts the elements of nature, including stars, as fighting against the foreign oppressor.

Imagine that someone living in Babylon at the height of its glory might read these words of Isaiah 13, particularly Isaiah 13:19–22. How foolish and impossible they would have seemed! What other prophecies, yet unfulfilled, seem foolish and impossible to us now? Why would we be foolish, however, to dismiss them as impossible?

Fall of the Mountain “King” (*Isaiah 14*)

In response to the fall of Babylon (*Isaiah 13*), which frees God’s people (*Isa. 14:1–3*), Isaiah 14:4–23 utters a figurative taunt (*see also Mic. 2:4, Hab. 2:6*) against the king of Babylon. It is poetic, not meant to be literal, obviously, as it portrays dead kings greeting their new colleague in the realm of death (*Isa. 14:9, 10*), where maggots and worms are his bedding (*Isa. 14:11*). This is simply the Lord’s dramatic way of telling the haughty king that he shall be brought low, as other proud monarchs before him—it is not a commentary on the state of the dead!

How could Isaiah 14:12–14 apply to a king of Babylon?

Babylonian kings did not suffer from lack of self-esteem (*Daniel 4, 5*). But aspiring to “be like the most High” (*Isa. 14:14*) would be beyond even the most inflated ego. While kings claimed strong connections with the gods, they were subservient to them. This was dramatically demonstrated every year on the fifth day of the Babylonian New Year Festival, in which the king was required to remove his royal insignia before approaching the statue of Marduk so his kingship could be reaffirmed. The idea of displacing even a lesser god would have been looked upon as crazy and suicidal.

As in Isaiah 14, Ezekiel 28 identifies heaven-daring arrogance with the ruler of a city. Here also, the description goes beyond that of an earthly monarch, and God’s crosshairs come into sharper focus: The proud potentate was in the Garden of Eden, an anointed, covering, or guardian cherub on God’s holy mountain, perfect from the day he was created until sin was found in him, cast out by God, and will eventually be destroyed with fire (*Ezek. 28:12–18*). Applied to any human being, the specific terms of this rhetoric are so figurative as to be meaningless. But Revelation 12:7–9 does tell of a mighty being who was cast out of heaven with his angels: “Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (*Rev. 12:9, NRSV*), who deceived Eve in Eden (*Genesis 3*).

Satan has a proud imagination: “You have said, ‘I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas,’ yet you are but a mortal, and no god” (*Ezek. 28:2, NRSV*). The manner of his death will prove he is no god. Unlike Christ, Satan will perish in the heart of a sea of fire (*Rev. 20:10*), never to haunt the universe again.

Compare Isaiah 14:13, 14 with Matthew 11:29, John 13:5, and Philippians 2:5–8. What does this contrast tell us about the character of God as opposed to the character of Satan? What does this contrast tell us about how the Lord views pride, arrogance, and the desire for self-supremacy?

Heaven's Gate *(Isaiah 13, 14)*

In Isaiah 14 a taunt against Satan, the fallen “Day Star [*in KJV, “Lucifer”*], son of Dawn” (*Isa. 14:12, NRSV*) is blended into a taunt against the king of Babylon. Why? Compare Revelation 12:1–9, where a dragon identified as Satan (*Rev. 12:9*) tries to destroy a child as soon as it is born. In Revelation 12:5 the child clearly is Christ. But it was King Herod who tried to kill Jesus as a young child (*Matthew 2*). The dragon is both Satan and the Roman power represented by Herod, because Satan works through human agents. Similarly, Satan was the power behind the king of Babylon and the prince of Tyre.

Why does “Babylon” later refer to Rome (*1 Pet. 5:13*) and to an evil power in the book of Revelation (*Rev. 14:8; Rev. 16:19; Rev. 17:5; Rev. 18:2, 10, 21*)?

Like literal Babylon, Rome and the “Babylon” of Revelation are proud, ruthless powers that oppress God’s people. See especially Revelation 17:6, for it is “drunk with the blood of the saints” (*NRSV*). They rebel against God, an idea implied in the name “Babylon” itself. In the Babylonian language, the name is *bab ili*, which means: “the gate of god(s),” referring to the place of access to the divine realm. Compare Genesis 11, where people built the tower of Babel (Babylon) so that by their own power they could rise to the divine level of immunity from any accountability to God.

When Jacob awoke from a dream in which he saw a ladder connecting heaven and earth, he exclaimed: “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (*Gen. 28:17, NRSV*). Notice that the “house of God” is “the gate of heaven”; that is, the way of access to the divine realm. Jacob named the place “Bethel,” which means “house of God.”

The “gate of heaven” at Bethel and the “gate of god(s)” at Babylon were opposite ways to reach the divine realm. Jacob’s ladder originated in heaven, revealed from above by God. But Babylon, with its towers and ziggurat temples, was built by human beings from the ground up. These opposite ways represent contrasting paths to salvation: divinely initiated grace versus human works. All true religion is based on the humble Bethel model: “For by grace you have been saved through faith” (*Eph. 2:8, 9, NRSV*). All false “religion,” including legalism and “secular” humanism, is based on the proud Babylon model. For the contrast between the two approaches, see Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the publican (*Luke 18:9–14*).

Even after spending a few years in a Zen monastery, Canadian songwriter Leonard Cohen told an interviewer, “I’m not saved.” In the context of today’s study, what do you think his problem was? What did he need to know about salvation?

Final Triumph of Zion *(Isaiah 24–27)*

Following oracles against individual nations in Isaiah 13–23, Isaiah 24–27 describes on a worldwide scale the climactic defeat of God’s enemies and the deliverance of His people.

Why does Isaiah’s description of the desolation of the earth *(Isaiah 24)* look like John’s description of events connected with 1,000 years that follow Christ’s second coming *(Revelation 20)*?

As in Isaiah 13 and 14, aspects of literal Babylon apply to later powers, and the “king of Babylon” represents fusion of human rulers with the mastermind behind them, Satan himself. So, a message that Babylon is fallen *(Isa. 21:9)* can be repeated at a later time *(Rev. 14:8, Rev. 18:2)*, and Satan is finally destroyed after the millennium *(Rev. 20:10)*. While the destruction of literal Babylon was a judgment “day of the LORD” *(Isa. 13:6, 9)*, another “great and terrible day of the LORD” *(Joel 2:31, Mal. 4:5, compare Zeph. 1:7)* is on the way.

Similarly, in Isaiah 24 the prophet’s vision reaches through conditions with which he is familiar to the time when “the moon will be abashed, and the sun ashamed; for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem” *(Isa. 24:23, NRSV)*. Isaiah undoubtedly thought the vision applied to the Jerusalem he knew, but the book of Revelation explains that it will actually be fulfilled in the New Jerusalem *(Rev. 21:2)*. “And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” *(Rev. 21:23, NRSV)*.

Does God really destroy the wicked?

Look at Isaiah 28:21, where God’s work of destruction is His strange “deed” *(NRSV)*. *It is* strange for Him, because He doesn’t want to do it, but it is, nevertheless, a deed, or an act. It is true that sin carries the seeds of self-destruction *(James 1:15)*. But because God has ultimate power over life and death, and He determines the time, place, and manner of final destruction *(Revelation 20)*, it is pointless to argue that He ultimately terminates the curse of sin in a passive way, by simply allowing cause and effect to take its natural course.

What we see in Isaiah 24–27 is what we see reflected in the entire Bible, which is that no matter the suffering, pain, and desolation now, in the end God and goodness will triumph over evil. What, then, is the only thing we can do if we ourselves want to be part of that final victory? *(Prov. 3:5–7, Rom. 10:9.)*

Further Thought: “Is it by conditions that we receive salvation?—Never by conditions that we come to Christ. And if we come to Christ, then what is the condition? The condition is that by living faith we lay hold wholly and entirely upon the merits of the blood of a crucified and risen Saviour. When we do that, then we work the works of righteousness. But when God is calling the sinner in our world, and inviting him, there is no condition there; he draws by the invitation of Christ, and it is not, Now you have got to respond in order to come to God. The sinner comes, and as he comes and views Christ elevated upon that cross of Calvary, which God impresses upon his mind, there is a love beyond anything that is imagined that he has taken hold of.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 6, p. 32.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Look at the above quote from Ellen G. White; read it in the context of Wednesday’s study. What is she telling us there? Notice in her statement both elements of the Christian walk: faith and then works. How does she differentiate between them?
- 2 Why are pride and arrogance such dangerous sins? Why are they so hard to put away? Can it be because by their very nature they blind people to their need to put them away? After all, if you are proud, you think you are OK, and if you think you are OK, why bother changing? How can dwelling on the Cross and what it represents (the only means of saving any person) be a powerful cure for pride and arrogance in anyone?
- 3 Does Isaiah see hope for people of other nations? (See, for example, Isa. 25:3, 6 and Isa. 26:9. Compare Rev. 19:9.)

Summary: Isaiah saw that following Assyria, Babylon would conquer Judah. But he also saw that in spite of superhuman rulers of the darkness of this world (*Eph. 6:12*) working through God’s human enemies and presuming to play God, the Lord would decisively prevail and bring eternal peace to our troubled planet.

Missing Commandment

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Valentina Shlee was astounded when her older sister, Galina, announced that they were not keeping all of the Ten Commandments in their hometown in northern Kazakhstan.

Valentina opened her Bible and read through the commandments. When she reached the fourth, she stopped.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” she read in Exodus 20:8–11. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (NKJV).

She and Galina resolved to find a church that observed the seventh-day Sabbath. But where should they look? “Let’s do it like this,” Valentina told Galina. “If the Bible is really the true Word of God, there must be a church that follows all ten commandments. Let’s pray about it.”

The sisters prayed for three months. “If there is a church that keeps all the commandments, please lead us to it,” Valentina prayed.

One day, Valentina felt an irresistible urge to visit Nelly, a relative. She didn’t know what came over her. Usually she stayed at home all day with her two-year-old son. At Nelly’s house, Valentina and Nelly were talking when another relative, Olga, rang the doorbell. Olga was not a close relative. In fact, Valentina had heard that she had joined a dangerous sect called the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In the house, Olga didn’t mince words.

“What do you think about God?” she asked Valentina.

Valentina ignored the question and asked one of her own.

“Do you keep all the commandments?” she said. “Do you keep the seventh-day Sabbath?”

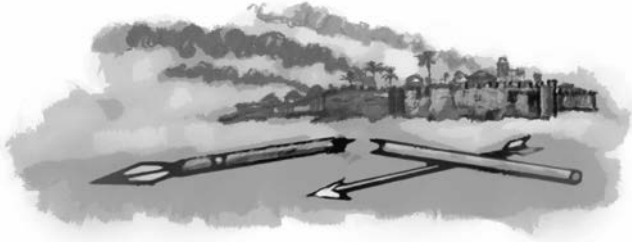


Hours later Valentina informed Galina that the Seventh-day Adventist Church observes all ten commandments. Several months later, the sisters were baptized together.

“Through the Holy Word, God led us to the church that keeps all ten commandments,” Valentina said.

Part of a 2017 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering helped open one of the first Seventh-day Adventist preschools in Valentina’s hometown, Pavlodar, Kazakhstan.

Defeat of the Assyrians



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 36:1, Isa. 36:2–20, Isa. 36:21–37:20, Isa. 37:21–38, Isaiah 38, Isaiah 39.*

Memory Text: “ ‘O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, the One who dwells between the cherubim, You are God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth’ ” (*Isaiah 37:16, NKJV*).

A gaunt man walks barefoot with his two sons. Another family has loaded all their belongings onto an oxcart pulled by emaciated oxen. A man leads the oxen while two women sit on the cart. Less fortunate people have no cart, so they carry their possessions on their shoulders.

“Soldiers are everywhere. A battering ram smashes into the city gate. Archers on top of the ram shoot at defenders on the walls. Hectic carnage reigns supreme.

“Fast forward. A king sits grandly on his throne, receiving booty and captives. Some captives approach him with hands upraised, pleading for mercy. Others kneel or crouch. Descriptions of these scenes with the king begin with these words: ‘Sennacherib, king of the world, king of Assyria’ and continue with such expressions as ‘sat in a *nēmedu*-throne and the booty of the city Lachish passed in review before him.’” —John Malcolm Russell, *The Writing on the Wall* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 137, 138.

This series of pictures, which once adorned the walls of Sennacherib’s “Palace Without a Rival,” are now in the British Museum, and what a story they have to tell about the plight of God’s professed people!

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 13.

Strings Attached *(Isa. 36:1)*

What happened to Judah? (*2 Kings 18:13, 2 Chron. 32:1, Isa. 36:1*)

When faithless Ahaz died and his faithful son Hezekiah succeeded him, Hezekiah inherited a kingdom that had lost full independence. Having purchased Assyrian aid against the alliance of Syria and northern Israel, Judah was forced to continue paying “protection money” in the form of tribute to Assyria (*see 2 Chron. 28:16–21*). When the Assyrian king Sargon II died on a distant battlefield and was succeeded by Sennacherib in 705 B.C., Assyria appeared vulnerable. Evidence from Assyrian and biblical texts reveals that Hezekiah seized this opportunity to rebel (*see 2 Kings 18:7*), taking aggressive action as the ringleader of an anti-Assyrian revolt among the small nations in his region.

Unfortunately for him, Hezekiah had underestimated the resilience of Assyria’s might. In 701 B.C., when Sennacherib had subdued other parts of his empire, he lashed out against Syria-Palestine with devastating force and ravaged Judah.

How did Hezekiah prepare for a confrontation with Assyria? (*2 Chron. 32:1–8.*)

When Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib intended to take Jerusalem, the capital city, he made extensive preparations for a confrontation with Assyria. He strengthened his fortifications, further equipped and organized his army, and increased the security of Jerusalem’s water supply (*see also 2 Kings 20:20, 2 Chron. 32:30*). The remarkable Siloam water tunnel, commemorated by an inscription telling how it was constructed, almost certainly dates to Hezekiah’s preparation for a potential siege.

Just as important as military and organizational leadership, Hezekiah provided spiritual leadership as he sought to boost the morale of his people at this frightening time. “But the king of Judah had determined to do his part in preparing to resist the enemy; and, having accomplished all that human ingenuity and energy could do, he had assembled his forces and had exhorted them to be of good courage.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 351.

If Hezekiah trusted the Lord so much, why did he put forth so much effort on his own? Did his works negate his faith? See Philippians 2:12, 13 on cooperating with God, who provides the power that is truly effective.

Propaganda *(Isa. 36:2–20)*

The rulers of Assyria were not only brutal but they also were intelligent. Their goal was wealth and power, not simply destruction (*compare Isa. 10:13, 14*). Why use resources to take a city by force if you can persuade its inhabitants to surrender? So, while he was engaged in the siege of Lachish, Sennacherib sent his *rabshakeh*, a kind of high officer, to take Jerusalem by propaganda.

What arguments did the *rabshakeh* use to intimidate Judah? (*Isa. 36:2–20, see also 2 Kings 18:17–35, 2 Chron. 32:9–19.*)

The *rabshakeh* made some rather powerful arguments. You cannot trust Egypt to help you because she is weak and unreliable. You cannot depend on the Lord to help you because Hezekiah has offended Him by removing His high places and altars throughout Judah, telling the people to worship at one altar in Jerusalem. In fact, the Lord is on Assyria's side and told Sennacherib to destroy Judah. You don't even have enough trained men to handle 2,000 horses.

To avoid a siege in which you have nothing to eat and drink, give up now and you will be treated well. Hezekiah cannot save you, and because the gods of all the other countries conquered by Assyria have not saved them, you can be sure that your God will not save you, either.

Was the *rabshakeh* telling the truth? _____

Because there was much truth in what he was saying, his arguments were persuasive. Backing him up were two unspoken arguments. First, he had just come from Lachish, only 30 miles away, where the Assyrians were showing what happened to a strongly fortified city that dared resist them. Second, he had a powerful contingent of the Assyrian army with him (*Isa. 36:2*). Knowing the fate of armies and cities elsewhere (*including Samaria, the capital of northern Israel: 2 Kings 18:9, 10*) that had succumbed to Assyria, no Judahite would have reason to doubt that from a human point of view Jerusalem was doomed (*compare Isa. 10:8–11*). The *rabshakeh* also was right in saying that Hezekiah had destroyed various places of sacrifice in order to centralize worship at the temple in Jerusalem (*2 Kings 18:4, 2 Chron. 31:1*). But had this reform offended the Lord, who was the only hope His people had left? Would He, and could He, save them? It was up to God to answer this question!

Have you ever been in a similar situation, where, from a human standpoint, all seemed lost? What was your only recourse? If willing, be prepared to share with your class that experience, how you coped, and the ultimate outcome.

Shaken but Not Forsaken *(Isa. 36:21–37:20)*

How did the clever oratory of the *rabshakeh* affect Hezekiah and his officials? (*2 Kings 18:37–19:4, Isa. 36:21–37:4.*)

Shaken to the core and mourning in distress, Hezekiah turned to God, humbly seeking the intercession of Isaiah, the very prophet whose counsel his father had ignored.

How did God encourage Hezekiah? (*Isa. 37:5–7.*)

The message was brief, but it was enough. God was on the side of His people. Isaiah predicted that Sennacherib would hear a rumor that would distract him from his attack on Judah. This was immediately fulfilled.

Temporarily frustrated, but by no means giving up for long, Sennacherib sent Hezekiah a threatening message: “ ‘Do not let your God on whom you rely deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. . . . Have the gods of the nations delivered them?’ ” (*Isa. 37:10, 12, NRSV; see also 2 Chron. 32:17.*)

This time Hezekiah went straight to the temple and spread the message out before the Lord of hosts, “ ‘enthroned above the cherubim’ ” (*Isa. 37:14–16, NRSV.*)

How did Hezekiah’s prayer identify what was at stake in Jerusalem’s crisis? (*Isa. 37:15–20.*)

Sennacherib had pointedly attacked Hezekiah’s strongest defense: faith in his God. Rather than buckling under, Hezekiah appealed to God to demonstrate who He is, “ ‘so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD’ ” (*Isa. 37:20, NRSV.*)

Read prayerfully Hezekiah’s prayer (*Isa. 37:15–20*). What aspects about God does he focus on? What principle do we see in this prayer that can give us encouragement and strength to stay faithful in our own personal crises?

The Rest of the Story *(Isa. 37:21–38)*

According to Sennacherib, as reported in his annals, he took forty-six fortified towns, besieged Jerusalem, and made Hezekiah the Jew “a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage.”—James B. Pritchard, editor, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 288. But in spite of his penchant for propaganda as an extension of his monumental ego, neither in text nor in pictures does he claim to have taken Jerusalem. From a human point of view, this omission is amazing, given the inexorable power of Sennacherib and the fact that Hezekiah led a revolt against him. Rebels against Assyria had short life expectancies and gruesome deaths.

Scholars acknowledge that even if we did not have the biblical record, we would be compelled to admit that a miracle must have taken place. The fact that Sennacherib lined the walls of his “Palace Without a Rival” with reliefs (carved pictures) vividly depicting his successful siege of Lachish appears to be due to his need for a face-saving device. But for the grace of God, these pictures would have shown Jerusalem instead! Sennacherib did not tell the rest of the story, but the Bible does.

What is the rest of the story? *(Isa. 37:21–37.)*

In response to Hezekiah’s prayer of total faith, God sent him a message of total assurance for Judah that boils over with molten fury against the proud Assyrian king who had dared to defy the divine King of kings (*Isa. 37:23*). Then God promptly fulfilled His promise to defend Jerusalem (*2 Kings 19:35–37*; *2 Chron. 32:21, 22*; *Isa. 37:36–38*).

A big crisis calls for a big miracle, and big it was. The body count was high: 185,000. So, Sennacherib had no choice but to go home, where he met his own death (*compare Isaiah’s prediction in Isa. 37:7–38*).

“The God of the Hebrews had prevailed over the proud Assyrian. The honor of Jehovah was vindicated in the eyes of the surrounding nations. In Jerusalem the hearts of the people were filled with holy joy.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 361. Also, if Sennacherib had conquered Jerusalem, he would have deported the population in such a way that Judah would have lost its identity, as northern Israel did. From one perspective, then, there would have been no Jewish people to whom the Messiah could be born. Their story would have ended right there. But God kept hope alive.

What do you say to someone who, not yet believing in the Bible or the God of the Bible, asks this question: Was it fair that these Assyrian soldiers, who just happened to be born where they were, should die en masse like this? How do you, personally, understand the Lord’s actions here?

In Sickness and in Wealth *(Isaiah 38, 39)*

The events of Isaiah 38 and 39 (*2 Kings 20*) took place very close to the time God delivered Hezekiah from Sennacherib, even though the deliverance, as depicted in Isaiah 37 (*see also 2 Kings 19*) had not yet occurred. Indeed, Isaiah 38:5, 6 and *2 Kings 20:6* show that they still faced the Assyrian threat.

“Satan was determined to bring about both the death of Hezekiah and the fall of Jerusalem, reasoning no doubt that if Hezekiah were out of the way, his efforts at reform would cease and the fall of Jerusalem could be the more readily accomplished.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 240.

What does the above quote tell us about how important good leadership is for God’s people?

What sign does the Lord give Hezekiah to confirm his faith? (*2 Kings 20:8–10, Isa. 38:6–8.*)

By rejecting signs offered by God (*Isaiah 7*), Ahaz had started the course of events that led to trouble with Assyria. But now Hezekiah had asked for a sign (*2 Kings 20:8*); so, God strengthened him to meet the crisis his father had brought upon Judah. Indeed, reversing the shadow on the sundial of Ahaz was possible only through a miracle.

The Babylonians studied movements of heavenly bodies and recorded them accurately. Thus, they would have noticed the sun’s strange behavior and wondered what it meant. The fact that King Merodach-baladan sent envoys at this time is no accident. The Babylonians had learned of the connection between Hezekiah’s recovery and the miraculous sign.

Now we know why God chose this particular sign. Just as He later used the star of Bethlehem to bring wise men from the East, He used a solar shift to bring messengers from Babylon. This was a unique opportunity for them to learn about the true God. Merodach-baladan spent his entire career trying to win lasting independence from Assyria. He needed powerful allies, which explains his motivation for contacting Hezekiah. If the sun itself moved at Hezekiah’s request, what could he do to Assyria?

How did Hezekiah lose an incredible opportunity to glorify God and point the Babylonians to Him? What was the result? (*Isaiah 39.*) Hezekiah, who should have been witnessing to them about the Lord, pointed, instead, to his own “glory.” What is the lesson for us?

Further Thought: “Only by the direct interposition of God could the shadow on the sundial be made to turn back ten degrees; and this was to be the sign to Hezekiah that the Lord had heard his prayer. Accordingly, ‘the prophet cried unto the Lord: and He brought the shadow ten degrees backward, by which it had gone down in the dial of Ahaz.’ Verses 8–11.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 342.

“The visit of these messengers from the ruler of a faraway land gave Hezekiah an opportunity to extol the living God. How easy it would have been for him to tell them of God, the upholder of all created things, through whose favor his own life had been spared when all other hope had fled! . . .

“But pride and vanity took possession of Hezekiah’s heart, and in self-exaltation he laid open to covetous eyes the treasures with which God had enriched His people. The king ‘showed them the house of his precious things, the silver, and the gold, and the spices, and the precious ointment, and all the house of his armor, and all that was found in his treasures: there was nothing in his house, nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah showed them not.’ Isaiah 39:2. Not to glorify God did he do this, but to exalt himself in the eyes of the foreign princes.”—Pages 344, 345.

Discussion Questions:

❶ How is Satan like the Assyrian *rabshakeh*? Does he tell the truth when he says that you have sinned (*Zech. 3:1*)? How does God respond? (See *Zech. 3:2–5*.) What is our only hope against these accusations? (*Rom. 8:1*.)

❷ Does Satan stop his accusations when you are forgiven? (See *Rev. 12:10*.) After you are forgiven, when Satan goes on saying that you belong to him because of your sin, what is the nature of his accusation? (See *Deut. 19:16–21*: law of a lying, malicious witness.)

Summary: In response to the cry of a faithful king, God saved His people and showed who He is: the omnipotent King of Israel who controls the destiny of earth; not only does He destroy those who attempt to destroy His people but He also provides opportunities for others, no matter how “Babylonian,” to become His people.

Unexplainable Voice

By ANDREW McCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Pavlodar, a city of 300,000 people in northern Kazakhstan, isn't particularly large. But Valentina Shlee couldn't seem to find the time to make the trip across town to deliver a gift from Germany.

Valentina spent a lot of time caring for her three children. She also helped her husband make ends meet by selling homemade jam and pickles from a table on a city sidewalk. She felt badly that a gift, received in a package from her cousin Nelly, who had immigrated to Germany, was still in her house. Nelly had asked her to deliver the gift to a friend, Olga.

A month passed. One afternoon, Valentina was pausing to rest on a couch between house chores when she was startled to hear someone address her.

"Stand up, pick up the videotapes, and go to Olga," the voice said.

The voice wasn't audible. It spoke from within her.

Not sure what was happening, Valentina quickly got up, put on street clothes, picked up the gift, and headed to Olga's apartment building. As she opened the front entry door to the apartment building, she noticed that a woman entered behind her. The stranger followed her up the stairs to Olga's apartment. When Olga opened her door, she welcomed both women into her home.

Valentina wondered what was going on.

"Rosa, this is Valentina. Valentina, this is Rosa," Olga said, introducing the two women to each other. Then she turned to Rosa. "You need to talk to Valentina," she said.

Rosa began to weep. Through tears, she explained that she was facing numerous difficulties at home and had contemplated suicide. She also was seeking God, but she didn't understand what she was reading in the Bible.

"Valentina is a Christian," Olga said. "She can help you."

Valentina invited Rosa to attend Bible studies with her. Several months later, Rosa was baptized.

Valentina said the experience underscored the importance of abiding in Christ as described in John 15:7, 8, where Jesus said, "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples" (NKJV).

"When you have an abiding relationship with God, He can tell you where to go and whom to talk with," Valentina said. "You can know His will."



Part of a 2017 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering helped open the first Seventh-day Adventist preschool in Valentina's hometown, Pavlodar, Kazakhstan.

“Comfort My People”



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Isa. 40:1, 2; Isa. 40:3–8; Isa. 40:9–11; Isa. 40:12–31.*

Memory Text: “Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, you who bring good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, be not afraid; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’ ” (*Isaiah 40:9, NKJV*).

World War II ended in 1945 while a Japanese soldier named Shoichi Yokoi was hiding out in the jungle on the island of Guam. Leaflets dropped from U.S. planes proclaimed peace, but Yokoi thought it a trick. A loyal, patriotic soldier of the emperor, he had vowed never to surrender. Because he had no contact with civilization, he lived on what he could find in the jungle, a sparse, hard existence indeed.

“In 1972, 27 years after the end of World War II, hunters came across Yokoi while he was fishing, and he only then learned that the message of peace had been true. While the rest of his people had been enjoying peace for decades, Yokoi had been enduring decades of privation and stress.”—Roy Gane, *Altar Call* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Diadem, 1999), p. 304, adapted.

Many centuries earlier, through the prophet Isaiah, God announced that the time of His peoples’ stress and suffering was really over: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (*Isa. 40:1, 2, NRSV*).

Let’s take a look at what this means.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 20.

Comfort for the Future *(Isa. 40:1, 2)*

In Isaiah 40:1, 2, God comforts His people. Their time of punishment has finally ended. What punishment is that?

There are many answers to this question. There was the punishment administered by Assyria, the rod of God's anger (*Isaiah 10*), from which God delivered Judah by destroying Sennacherib's army in 701 B.C. (*Isaiah 37*). There was the punishment administered by Babylon, which would carry away goods and people from Judah because Hezekiah had displayed his wealth to the messengers from Merodach-baladan (*Isaiah 39, NRSV*). And there was the punishment administered by one of the other nations against which Isaiah wrote messages (*Isaiah 14–23*).

Meanwhile, though "Assyria" and "Assyrian[s]" are mentioned 43 times from Isaiah 7:17 to 38:6, this nation appears only once in the rest of Isaiah, where Isaiah 52:4 refers to past oppression by Egypt and then by "the Assyrian." In the latter part of Isaiah, deliverance from exile in Babylon is mentioned (*Isa. 43:14; Isa. 47:1; Isa. 48:14, 20*), and it is Cyrus, the Persian who conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., who is to free the exiles of Judah (*Isa. 44:28, Isa. 45:1, Isa. 45:13*).

Isaiah 1–39 emphasizes events leading up to deliverance from the Assyrians in 701 B.C., but at the beginning of chapter 40, the book leaps ahead a century and a half to the end of Babylon, in 539 B.C., and the return of the Jews shortly thereafter.

Is the theme of return from Babylon linked with anything earlier in Isaiah? If so, what?

Isaiah 39 serves as a transition to the following chapters by predicting a Babylonian captivity, at least for some of Hezekiah's descendants (*Isa. 39:6, 7*). Furthermore, the oracles of Isaiah 13, 14, and 21 predict the fall of Babylon and the liberty this would bring to God's people: "But the LORD will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land. . . . When the LORD has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard service with which you were made to serve, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon" (*Isa. 14:1–4, NRSV*). Notice the close connection with Isaiah 40:1, 2, where God promises His people there is an end to their suffering.

What do Bible promises about the end of suffering mean to you now, amid your present suffering? What good would our faith be without those promises? Why, then, is it so important to cling to them, no matter what?

Presence, Word, and Roadwork (*Isa. 40:3–8*)

How do God's people receive comfort? (*Isa. 40:1–8*.)

An unnamed herald announces that God is coming to reveal His glory (*Isa. 40:3–5*). Another voice proclaims that although humans are transient like foliage, “the word of our God will stand forever” (*Isa. 40:8, NRSV*).

After the exile, God's people gain back what they had received at Mount Sinai and then rejected all throughout their apostasy, for which they were punished: *God's presence and His Word*. These are the basic ingredients of God's covenant with Israel, which were enshrined at His sanctuary in their midst (*Exod. 25:8, 16*). Because they had violated His Word, God had abandoned His temple (*Ezekiel 9–11*), but He is coming back. His presence and His eternally dependable Word bring comfort, deliverance, and hope.

What preparation is necessary for the Lord's coming? (*Isa. 40:3–5*.)

It is not fitting for a king to be jolted by a rough road. So, his coming is preceded by roadwork. The more so for the King of kings! His coming, apparently from the east, where He has been in exile with His people as a sanctuary to them (*Ezek. 11:16*), would require major rearrangement of the terrain. Construction of a literal, level super-highway through the rugged hills east of Jerusalem would be daunting, even with dynamite and bulldozers. God is the only One who can do the work; it is He who turns “the rough places into level ground” (*Isa. 42:16, NRSV*). But He doesn't need a literal road for transportation because He has an airborne chariot of cherubim (*Ezekiel 1, 9–11*).

The New Testament explicitly applies Isaiah's prophecy to the spiritual *roadwork* accomplished through the preaching of John the Baptist (*Matt. 3:3*). His message was: “ ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’ ” (*Matt. 3:2, NRSV*) and the baptism that he performed was “of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (*Mark 1:4, NRSV*). So, the *roadwork* was repentance, willingness to turn away from sin, in order to receive the comfort of God's forgiveness and presence.

Jeremiah 31:31–34 proclaimed the same spiritual message in plenty of time for the exiles of Judah to understand the spiritual nature of roadwork for God. In this passage, the Lord promises those who are willing a fresh start: a “new covenant” in which He puts His law in their hearts and pledges to be their God. They know Him and His character, because He has forgiven them.

Read carefully Isaiah 40:6–8. What hope can you, who fade away as does the grass, derive from what these verses say? In what should they warn us against putting our trust?

The Birth of Evangelism (*Isa. 40:9–11*)

What kind of event is described in Isaiah 40:9–11?

Later in Isaiah there appears a male herald of good news for Jerusalem (*Isa. 41:27, Isa. 52:7*). But in Isaiah 40:9 the herald to proclaim “‘Here is your God!’” (*NRSV*) from a mountain is female, a fact brought out in the Hebrew.

In Psalm 68, David praises God because He “gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity” (*Ps. 68:6, NRSV*). Though here these words apply to the Exodus from Egyptian bondage, Isaiah uses the same ideas with reference to the proclamation of a second “Exodus”: the return from Babylonian captivity.

Meanwhile, the New Testament applies Isaiah 40:3–5 to John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ, the eternal Word who *became* the Lord’s presence in flesh among His people (*John 1:14*).

Even earlier than John, others spoke about the good news of His coming. Among the first of these were the elderly Simeon and Anna, who met Baby Jesus when He was dedicated at the temple (*Luke 2:25–38*). Like Isaiah’s heralds, they were male and female. Simeon was looking forward to the consolation/comfort of Israel in the form of the Messiah (*Luke 2:25, 26*).

In light of Isaiah’s prophecy, it does not appear coincidental that Anna, a prophetess, was the very first to announce *publicly at the temple mountain to the people of Jerusalem* that the Lord had come: “At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (*Luke 2:38, NRSV*). This was the birth of Christian evangelism as we know it: proclamation of the gospel, the good news, that Jesus Christ has come to bring salvation. Later, Christ entrusted to another woman, Mary Magdalene, the first tidings of His triumphant resurrection (*John 20:17, 18*), which ensured that His gospel mission to planet Earth was accomplished. Flesh is like grass, but the divine Word who became flesh is eternal (*see Isa. 40:6–8*)!

Look at Isaiah 40:11. What kind of imagery is presented here? Write out for yourself a paragraph on how you, personally, have experienced shepherding by the Lord. Why is it good to recount in your mind the way the Lord has led you?

Merciful Creator *(Isa. 40:12–31)*

How does Isaiah 40 develop the themes of God’s mercy and power?

Throughout this chapter, God’s mercy and power are interwoven (see below) and even blended together, because they are both necessary in order for God to save His people. He wants to save them, because He is merciful; He is able to save them, because He is powerful.

Mercy (*Isa. 40:1–5*): comfort, coming of the Lord to deliver

Power (*Isa. 40:3–8*): glory, permanence versus human weakness

Mercy (*Isa. 40:9–11*): good news of deliverance, Shepherd of His people

Power (*Isa. 40:12–26*): incomparable Creator

Mercy (*Isa. 40:27–31*): as Creator, gives power to the faint

Having introduced God’s might in terms of His glory and permanence (*Isa. 40:3–8*), Isaiah elaborates on His power and superior wisdom, which make earth and earthlings appear puny (*Isa. 40:12–17*). Here Isaiah’s style, with rhetorical questions and vivid analogies referring to the earth and its parts, sounds like God’s answer to Job (*Job 38–41*).

What is the answer to Isaiah’s rhetorical question: “To whom then will you liken God?” (*Isa. 40:18, NRSV*)

For Isaiah, as for Job, the answer goes without saying: no one. God is incomparable. But Isaiah picks up on his question and refers to the answer that many ancient people implied by their actions, which is that God is like an idol (*Isa. 40:19, 20*).

To this notion Isaiah responds. Already it looks foolish to use an idol as a likeness of God, but just to be sure people get the point, he elaborates on God’s uniqueness and brings in the unanswerable argument that He is the holy Creator (*Isa. 40:21–26*).

How does verse 27 reveal the attitude of the people addressed by Isaiah’s message? In what ways are we guilty of having the same attitude?

The purpose of God’s message is to comfort people who need it! Like Job, their suffering had made them confused and discouraged concerning His character.

Look through the verses for today. They talk not only of God’s mercy and His power but also of the fact that He is the Creator. Why is this truth so important to understand? How does the Sabbath, each week, help reinforce this crucial point?

The Problem With Idolatry *(Isa. 40:19, 20)*

Idolatry destroys a unique, intimate relationship with God by replacing Him with something else (*Exod. 20:4, 5; Isa. 42:8*). So, prophets refer to idolatry as spiritual “adultery” (*Jer. 3:6–9, Ezek. 16:15–19*).

Read Isaiah 41:29. How does Isaiah characterize idols? How do you understand what he is saying there about them? Why is that so accurate a depiction of any idol, no matter what it is?

Ancient idolaters believed they worshiped powerful divine beings through images or symbols of them. Worship of an idol representing another god breaks the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (*Exod. 20:3, NRSV*). But if an idol is intended to represent the true God, as the golden calf was (*Exod. 32:4, 5*), the Lord rejects it as a likeness of Himself, for nobody knows how to depict Him (*Deut. 4:15–19*), and nothing can represent His incomparable glory and greatness. Thus, an idol itself functions as another god, and worshiping it breaks the first and second commandments.

God’s people don’t need idols, because they have His real Shekinah presence with them in His sanctuary. To worship an idol is to replace and, therefore, deny His real presence.

What kinds of idolatry do we face as a church today? Does idolatry appear in more subtle forms in the church today? If so, how?

“Many who bear the name of Christians are serving other gods besides the Lord. Our Creator demands our supreme devotion, our first allegiance. Anything which tends to abate our love for God, or to interfere with the service due Him, becomes thereby an idol.” —Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, pp. 1011, 1012.

We learn from ancient writings that idolatry was attractive, because it was about materialism. Using modes of worship people could relate to, idolaters honored forces they believed could give them fertility and prosperity. It was *self-help* religion. Sound familiar?

Just before the Lord comes again, with His way prepared by the *roadwork* of a final Elijah message of reconciliation (*Malachi 4*), the choice will be the same as in the days of Isaiah: Will you worship the Creator, or will you worship something else (*Revelation 13, 14*). For in the end, we always worship something.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Behold Your God!” in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 311–321.

“In Isaiah’s day the spiritual understanding of mankind was dark through misapprehension of God. Long had Satan sought to lead men to look upon their Creator as the author of sin and suffering and death. Those whom he had thus deceived, imagined that God was hard and exacting. They regarded Him as watching to denounce and condemn, unwilling to receive the sinner so long as there was a legal excuse for not helping him. The law of love by which heaven is ruled had been misrepresented by the archdeceiver as a restriction upon men’s happiness, a burdensome yoke from which they should be glad to escape. He declared that its precepts could not be obeyed and that the penalties of transgression were bestowed arbitrarily.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 311.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Summarize in your own words the message of Isaiah 40:12–31. Write it using modern images, such as modern scientific discoveries that show even more graphically the awesome power of our God. Share your summary with the class.
- 2 How does Isaiah’s description of the permanence of God’s Word versus the fragile transience of human life (*Isa. 40:6–8*) speak to your fear of death? How does it relate to your hope of resurrection? (*Job 19:25–27, Dan. 12:2, 1 Cor. 15:51–57, 1 Thess. 4:13–18.*)
- 3 By taking Isaiah 40:12–31 to heart, how could one be cured of pride and arrogance?

Summary: Through Isaiah, God brought comfort to those who had been suffering. Their time of trouble had ended, and God was returning to them. Rather than being discouraged and confused, they could trust God to use His creative power on their behalf.

Seven Little Fishers of Men

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

What is the power of a small group?

The pastor of a Seventh-day Adventist church in northeastern Mexico announced to its 60 members that they should form small groups to meet during the week. Each group should have a name, a motto, a goal, and a theme song. The idea came from the local conference.

Several adults immediately formed a small group called Joseph, saying, "Let's be like Joseph and have a vision to save others." Other adults established groups called Sowers of Faith, The Rock, Friends of Jesus, and United in Faith. The director of the children's ministries department also wanted to create a group. She gathered the seven children and their parents who regularly worshiped at Nuevo Tampico Seventh-day Adventist Church in Altamira to discuss the idea, and the mother of eight-year-old Manuel offered her house for the weekly meetings. The group adopted the name Fishers of Men.

Fifteen children showed up for the first meeting, including eight children from non-Adventist homes who were invited by the children's ministries director, Elsa Galván. The children took turns reading a Bible story. They also sang songs and prayed. At the end of the hourlong gathering, the children drank hot chocolate and ate cookies.

The Fishers of Men group began to meet every week. The children also visited a hospital once a month to pray with patients and to distribute the Adventist Church's sharing book of the year. The children gave *atole* hot drinks to the patients and *tortas* bread filled with beans and cheese.

With a stable group of children attending week after week, the small group decided to form an Adventurer club. Later, the older children in the group created a Pathfinder club. After a while, the children started offering Bible studies to family members, friends, and neighbors. With the help of his mother, Manuel gave Bible studies to his grandfather and aunt. One day, his grandfather and aunt announced that they wanted to go to the hospital with the children. Shortly afterward, they were baptized. Manuel and his mother are now giving Bible studies to an eight-year-old cousin. Many other children also are giving Bible studies, including 12-year-old Victor and his mother, who are studying with an eight-year-old friend and two cousins, ages 7 and 9.

In its first year, Fishers of Men led 12 people to baptism, more than half of the 20 people baptized in the church over that period. "This says a lot about the power of a small group," said the church's 34-year-old pastor, Samuel Alvarado (pictured with Manuel, left, and Victor). "Jesus started His ministry with a small group of twelve disciples and our church is doing the same for the glory of God."



To Serve *and* to Save



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isaiah 41, Isa. 42:1–7, Isa. 44:26–45:6, Isa. 49:1–12.*

Memory Text: “Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles’ ” (*Isaiah 42:1, NKJV*).

Many feel that it would be a great privilege to visit the scenes of Christ's life on earth, to walk where He trod, to look upon the lake beside which He loved to teach, and the hills and valleys on which His eyes so often rested. But we need not go to Nazareth, to Capernaum, or to Bethany, in order to walk in the steps of Jesus. We shall find His footprints beside the sickbed, in the hovels of poverty, in the crowded alleys of the great city, and in every place where there are human hearts in need of consolation. In doing as Jesus did when on earth, we shall walk in His steps.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 640.

Isaiah spoke of a Servant of the Lord with a similar mission of mercy: “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; . . . to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (*Isa. 42:3, 7, NRSV*).

Let's take a look at this Servant. Who is He, and what does He accomplish?

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 27.

Servant Nation *(Isaiah 41)*

In Isaiah 41:8 God speaks of “Israel, my servant” (NRSV), and in 42:1 He introduces “my servant.” Who is this Servant?

Is it Israel/Jacob, the ancestor of the Israelites? The nation of Israel? The Messiah/Christ, identified in the New Testament as Jesus?

There are two kinds of references to servants of God woven through Isaiah 41–53. One servant is named “Israel” or “Jacob,” as in Isaiah 41:8; Isaiah 44:1, 2, 21; Isaiah 45:4; and Isaiah 48:20. Because God addresses Israel/Jacob in the present, it is clear he, Jacob, represents the nation descended from him. This is confirmed by the fact that redemption for the Lord’s “servant Jacob” is accomplished at the time when he is to go out from Babylon (*Isa. 48:20*).

In other instances, such as Isaiah 42:1, Isaiah 50:10, Isaiah 52:13, and Isaiah 53:11, God’s Servant is not named. When He is first mentioned in Isaiah 42:1, His identity is not immediately apparent. However, as Isaiah develops His profile in later passages, it becomes clear that He is an individual who restores the tribes of Jacob (Israel) to God (*Isa. 49:5, 6*) and dies sacrificially on behalf of sinners (*Isa. 52:13–53:12; see also Isa. 49:5, 6*). Therefore He cannot be the same as the nation. So, it is clear that Isaiah speaks of two servants of God. One is corporate (the nation) and the other is individual.

What is the role of the servant nation? (*Isa. 41:8–20*.)

God assures Israel that the nation is still the servant of the Lord: “I have chosen you and not cast you off” (*Isa. 41:9, NRSV*). Then God gives to Israel one of the most magnificent promises in the Bible: “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand” (*Isa. 41:10, NRSV*). Here and in the following verses one of the basic roles of Israel is to trust the true God to save them (as King Ahaz did not) rather than to trust in other gods and their images as other nations do (*Isa. 41:7, 21–24, 28, 29*).

Notice how in Isaiah 41:14 the Lord calls the nation a worm. What point was He making? Look at the whole text to get a better answer. What should this teach us, as well, about our need to depend totally upon the Lord?

Unnamed Individual Servant *(Isa. 42:1–7)*

What is the role and character of God’s unnamed Servant, whom God chooses and on whom He puts His Spirit? *(Isa. 42:1–7.)*

Choose the best answer or combination of answers:

1. He provides justice for the nations.
2. He accomplishes His goals quietly and gently, but successfully.
3. He is a teacher.
4. He serves as a covenant between God and the people.
5. He gives light or hope by healing blindness and liberating prisoners.
6. All of the above.

How does the role and character of this Servant compare with that of the “shoot from the stump of Jesse,” on whom the Spirit of the Lord also rests *(Isaiah 11)*?

As in Isaiah 42, the Davidic ruler of Isaiah 11 acts in harmony with God, providing justice and deliverance for the oppressed, as well as wisdom and knowledge of God. We found that this “shoot” and “root” of Jesse is the Messiah, the divine Child of Isaiah 9:6, 7, who also brings “peace for the throne of David and his kingdom” with “justice and with righteousness” *(Isa. 9:7, NRSV)*. The Servant in Isaiah 42 is, obviously, the Messiah.

How does the New Testament identify the Servant of Isaiah 42:1–7, who provides justice? *(Matt. 12:15–21.)*

Matthew 12 quotes from Isaiah 42 and applies it to the quiet healing ministry of Jesus, God’s beloved Son, in whom He delights *(Isa. 42:1; Matt. 3:16, 17; Matt. 17:5)*. It is He whose ministry reestablishes God’s covenant connection with His people *(Isa. 42:6, Dan. 9:27)*.

Jesus and His disciples gained justice for people by delivering them from suffering, ignorance of God, and bondage to evil spirits, caused by Satan’s oppression *(Luke 10:19)*. Then Jesus died to ratify the “new covenant” *(Matt. 26:28, NKJV)* and to gain justice for the world by casting out Satan, the foreigner who had usurped the position of “ ‘ruler of this world’ ” *(John 12:31–33, NRSV)*.

Look at Isaiah 42:1–4, the depiction of Christ. Spend some time dwelling on the life of Jesus. What specific characteristics of His ministry so aptly fulfilled this prophecy? What lessons can we learn about how we should be ministering to others, as well?

Persian “Messiah” (*Isa. 44:26–45:6*)

What stunning prediction appears in Isaiah 44:26–45:6?

Isaiah’s ministry lasted from about 745 B.C. to about 685 B.C. After mentioning a conqueror from the east and from the north (*Isa. 41:2, 3, 25*) and implying that this was to be good news for Jerusalem (*Isa. 41:27*), Isaiah accurately predicted Cyrus *by name* and described his activities. He did come from north and east of Babylon and conquer it in 539 B.C.; he did serve God by releasing the Jews from their Babylonian exile; and he did authorize the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (*see Ezra 1*).

Put this prediction into perspective. Since there are about one hundred forty-six years from the time of Isaiah’s death to the fall of Babylon, his prophecy was a century and a half ahead of its time. It would be like George Washington predicting that a man named General Dwight Eisenhower would help liberate Europe in 1945!

Because the actions of Cyrus are well attested from a variety of ancient sources, including Babylonian chronicles, his own report in the “Cyrus Cylinder,” and the Bible (*2 Chron. 36:22, 23; Ezra 1; Daniel 5; Dan. 6:28; Dan. 10:1*), the accuracy of Isaiah’s prophecy is beyond dispute. This confirms the faith of people who believe that true prophets receive accurate predictions from God, who knows the future far in advance.

Why does God call Cyrus “His anointed”? (*Isa. 45:1*)

The Hebrew word for “anointed” here is the word from which we get the word *Messiah*. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, this word could refer to an anointed high priest (*Lev. 4:3, 5, 16; Lev. 6:22*), an anointed Israelite king (*1 Sam. 16:6; 1 Sam. 24:6, 10; 2 Sam. 22:51*), or the Messiah, a future ideal Davidic king and deliverer (*Ps. 2:2; Dan. 9:25, 26*). From Isaiah’s perspective, Cyrus was a future king, sent by God to deliver His people. But he was an unusual messiah, because he was non-Israelite. He would do some things the Messiah would do, such as defeat God’s enemies and release His captive people, but he could not be the same as the Messiah, because he was not descended from David.

By predicting Cyrus, God proved His unique divinity by demonstrating that He alone knows the future (*Isa. 41:4, 21–23, 26–28; Isa. 44:26*). He also reached out to Cyrus: “I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name” (*Isa. 45:3, NRSV*).

Think about some other Bible prophecies that have come to pass as predicted (such as all the kingdoms of Daniel 2 except the last, Daniel 7, or regarding the time of Christ in Daniel 9:24–27). What kind of hope do these prophecies offer us as individuals?

Hope in Advance

The fact that Isaiah accurately predicted Cyrus by name disturbs people who do not believe that prophets receive predictions from God. To cope, they accept the theory that a “second Isaiah,” another prophet living in the time of Cyrus, wrote Isaiah 40–66. Thus, the book of Isaiah is “sawn in two,” the same fate traditionally understood to have befallen the prophet himself (*see Heb. 11:37*).

There is, however, no historical witness to the existence of a second “Isaiah.” If he did exist, it would be strange for the Bible not to mention him, because his message is profoundly important, and his literary artistry is phenomenal. Not even the oldest Bible manuscript, the Isaiah scroll from Qumran, has any break between Isaiah 39 and 40 that would indicate a transition to the work of a new author.

Isaiah’s basic message is consistent throughout his book: Trust the true God, including His Messianic Deliverer, rather than other powers. Scholars rightly emphasize the shift in focus from the Assyrian period in Isaiah 1–39 to the Babylonian period in chapters 40 and following. But we have found that Isaiah 13, 14 and 39 already envisage a Babylonian captivity. It is true Isaiah 1–39 emphasizes judgment and Isaiah 40–66 emphasizes consolation. But in the earlier chapters, divine comfort and assurance are abundant also, and later passages, such as Isaiah 42:18–25, Isaiah 43:22–28, and Isaiah 48:1–11, speak of God’s judgments on Judah for forsaking Him. In fact, Isaiah’s predictions of *future* comfort imply suffering in the meantime.

Though the nation did face terrible calamity because of the people’s sins, some among them did not give up hope. They clung to God’s promises, such as those found in Leviticus 26:40–45. Read the verses carefully. Put yourself in the place of those Hebrews who were alive after the nation’s defeat by Babylon. What hope could you find in these words?

Read once more through Leviticus 26:40–45. What spiritual principle do you see at work in those verses? What is the Lord saying to Israel there? How does the same principle work in our own lives?

A Feeling and Suffering Servant *(Isa. 49:1–12)*

Who is God’s Servant in Isaiah 49:1–12?

God calls and names Him before He is born, makes His mouth like a sword, and will be glorified in Him. God uses the Servant to bring the nation of Israel back to Himself, to be a light of salvation to all the world, to be a covenant, and to release prisoners. There is plenty of overlap between this description and that of Isaiah 42, where we identified the Servant as the Messiah. The New Testament finds the Servant’s attributes in Jesus Christ, in both comings (*Matt. 1:21, John 8:12, John 9:5, John 17:1–5, Rev. 1:16, Rev. 2:16, Rev. 19:15*).

If this Servant is the Messiah, why does God call Him “Israel” here? *(Isa. 49:3.)*

Earlier we found that in this section of Isaiah, God’s servant “Israel” or “Jacob” refers to the nation. But here the name Israel (without a parallel reference to Jacob) clearly applies to the individual Servant, who restores the nation to God (*Isa. 49:5*). The individual Servant has become the ideal embodiment or representative of the nation whose failure has compromised its use of the name “Israel” (*Isa. 48:1*).

What new element appears here? *(Isa. 49:4, 7.)*

Here is the first intimation of the difficulty involved in the Servant’s task. He laments, “ ‘I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity’ ” (*Isa. 49:4, NRSV*), an idea echoed in Daniel 9:26: “ ‘an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing’ ” (*NRSV*). But He clings to faith: “ ‘Yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God’ ” (*Isa. 49:4, NRSV*). J. Alec Motyer observes: “Thus, Isaiah foresaw a Servant with a real human nature, tested like we are and proving himself to be the author and perfecter of the way of faith, a real, personal faith that can still say *my God* when nothing any longer seems worthwhile.”—*The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 387.

Isaiah 49:7 is startling. The Servant is “deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers,” but the Lord says to Him: “ ‘Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you’ ” (*NRSV*).

Look back at Christ’s ministry. Right up until the end, didn’t He have reasons for discouragement? Yet, He stayed faithful, despite outward appearances. How are we to do the same—despite outward appearances?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White’s description of Jesus’ healing and teaching ministry in “At Capernaum,” *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 252–261.

“In the work of soul winning, great tact and wisdom are needed. The Savior never suppressed the truth, but He uttered it always in love. In His [dealings] with others, He exercised the greatest tact, and He was always kind and thoughtful. He was never rude, never needlessly spoke a severe word, never gave unnecessary pain to a sensitive soul. He did not censure human weakness. He fearlessly denounced hypocrisy, unbelief, and iniquity, but tears were in His voice as He uttered His scathing rebukes. He never made truth cruel, but ever manifested a deep tenderness for humanity. Every soul was precious in His sight. He bore Himself with divine dignity; yet He bowed with the tenderest compassion and regard to every member of the family of God. He saw in all, souls whom it was His mission to save.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 117.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, read over what Ellen G. White wrote above about how Christ ministered to others. Discuss the principles there, and then as a class discuss how well your own church reflects those principles corporately.
- 2 Do you know a “bruised reed” or “dimly burning wick” (*Isa. 42:3, NRSV*)? How can you help this person without “breaking” or “quenching” him or her? In what ways can you point such people to the Lord? In a practical sense, what would you tell them to do in order to get healing and help?
- 3 The argument for different authors of Isaiah originated from the premise that people cannot tell the future the way Isaiah did. What is the fundamental problem with this argument, and why must we, as Christians, reject that premise outright?

Summary: Deliverance requires a Deliverer. God’s servant nation would be delivered by two deliverers: Cyrus, who would set the captives free from Babylonian exile, and an unnamed Servant, whose identity as the Messiah is progressively revealed. This Servant would restore justice and bring the community of survivors back to God.

Garage Church

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Ten-year-old Luis moved with his parents to La Apartada, a town without a Seventh-day Adventist church in northern Colombia.

Father and Mother wanted Luis to go to church on Sabbath. Luis wanted to go to church. But the nearest Adventist church was located far away in another town. The district pastor had an idea. “You should open a church,” he said.

Father liked the idea. Mother liked the idea. Luis liked the idea. But where could people meet to worship? Their house was too small for many visitors. “Why don’t we use our garage?” Father said.

It was a good idea. The garage was bigger than the house. Besides, it was empty because the family didn’t own a car. Father told Luis to invite his new friends from school to come to the garage on Tuesday for a one-hour meeting.

“Come to my garage to hear something interesting and get some good food,” Luis told his friends.

“Sure, we’ll come!” they replied.

Thirty-seven children between the ages of 5 and 14 showed up the first Tuesday. Luis spoke to the children about the importance of keeping promises. He read from a church-created program about good values. Afterward, Mother gave the children *arroz con leche*, a dessert made with rice and milk.

Luis invited the children to return the next week. Sixty-five children came. The garage was not big enough, so after three months Father asked town authorities for a new place to meet. The mayor liked that Luis was teaching good values to the many children. “You can meet in the old town hall,” he said.

With so many children, Father decided to create Pathfinder and Adventurer clubs. The two clubs met in addition to Luis’s weekly meetings on good values.

Father saw an abandoned building that looked like an even better place to meet and received permission from the mayor to move. The mayor also gave one million pesos to renovate the place.

On a July morning, just four months after the group first met in the garage, 70 children and adults gathered in the renovated center for the first Sabbath worship service. Luis was happy. Most attendees were children he had invited.



Today, nine months after the garage first opened, 80 children and 20 adults worship in the center every Sabbath. Thirty-eight people have been baptized. Luis’s town now has an Adventist church.

“I’m very happy because I’ve learned many new things,” Luis said. “Most of all, I have learned that I can invite children to Jesus’ feet.”

Doing *the* Unthinkable



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 50:4–10, Isa. 52:13–53:12, Isa. 53:3–9, Isa. 53:10–12.*

Memory Text: “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed” (*Isaiah 53:5, NKJV*).

Lough Fook, a Chinese Christian, was moved with compassion for those of his compatriots who had become slaves in South American mines. He wanted to give them the hope of the gospel, but how could he have access to them? His solution was to sell himself for a term of five years as a slave. He was transported to Demerara, where he toiled in the mines and told his fellow workers about Jesus.

Lough Fook died—but not until 200 people were liberated from hopelessness by accepting Jesus as their Savior.

Such amazing self-sacrifice for the good of others! What an example!

By doing the unthinkable; that is, humbly “taking the form of a slave” (*Phil. 2:7, NRSV*), Jesus, too, had reached the unreachable—you and me and all the world steeped and lost in the abyss of sin.

This week, we’ll see this incredible event prophesied hundreds of years before it happened.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 6.

Isaiah's Testing Truth *(Isa. 50:4–10)*

If Isaiah intended to convey only information, he would lay out all the details regarding the Messiah at once. But in order to teach, persuade, and give his audience an encounter with the Servant of the Lord, he develops a rich fabric of recurring themes in symphonic fashion. He unfolds God's message in steps so that each aspect can be grasped in relation to the rest of the picture. Isaiah is an artist whose canvas is the soul of his listener.

Read Isaiah 50:4–10. Summarize what these verses are saying. How do you see Jesus in this passage?

We found in Isaiah 49:7 that God's Servant is despised, abhorred, and "the slave of rulers" (*NRSV*) but that "kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves" (*NRSV*). Here in Isaiah 50, we learn that the valley is deeper for the gentle Teacher whose words sustain the weary (*Isa. 50:4*). The path to vindication leads through physical abuse (*Isa. 50:6*).

This abuse sounds bad to those of us in modern Western cultures. But in an ancient Near Eastern culture, honor was a life-and-death matter for a person and his or her group. If you insulted and mistreated someone like this, you'd better be well protected; if they got half a chance, the victim and/or his clan would surely retaliate.

King David attacked and conquered the country of Ammon (*2 Sam. 10:1–12*) because its king had merely "seized David's envoys, shaved off half the beard of each, cut off their garments in the middle at their hips, and sent them away" (*2 Sam. 10:4, NRSV*). But in Isaiah 50 people strike the Servant, painfully pluck out hairs from His beard, and spit at Him. What makes these actions an international, intercosmic incident is that the victim is the envoy of the divine King of kings. In fact, by comparing Isaiah 9:6, 7 and Isaiah 11:1–16 with other "servant" passages, we found that the Servant *is* the King, the mighty Deliverer! But with all this power and honor, for some unthinkable reason, He does not save Himself! This is so strange that people didn't believe it. At Jesus' cross, leaders mocked Him: "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" (*Luke 23:35, NRSV*); "Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him" (*Matt. 27:42, NRSV*).

Read through Isaiah 50:4–10. Write down the spiritual principles depicted here that should be applied to our own lives. Look at yourself in light of the list you make. In what areas could you do better? If discouraged, then read on for the rest of the week.

The Suffering Servant Poem *(Isa. 52:13–53:12)*

Isaiah 52:13–53:12, known as the “Suffering Servant Poem,” confirms Isaiah’s reputation as “the gospel prophet.” In harmony with the excellence of the gospel, the poem towers above other literature. Though breathtakingly short, every phrase is packed with profound meaning that reveals the core of God’s unthinkable quest to save a race steeped and lost in sin.

This is not the “milk” of Isaiah’s word. He has prepared his audience by developing the Messianic theme from the early part of his book. In following the overall course of the Messiah’s life on earth, the prophet started with His conception and birth (*Isa. 7:14*), introduced His identity as a divine Davidic king (*Isa. 9:6, 7*), elaborated on His work of restoration for Israel (*Isa. 11:1–16*) and quiet ministry of liberation from injustice and suffering (*Isa. 42:1–7*). Then Isaiah revealed that the Messiah’s grand drama includes the contrast of tragedy before exaltation (*Isa. 49:1–12, Isa. 50:6–10*). Now the Suffering Servant Poem plumbs the depths of the tragedy.

Go back over those sections listed in the above paragraph. Review what they tell us about the Messiah, Jesus. How do they help to prepare us for what’s coming in Isaiah 52 and 53? Or do they simply make what happens in Isaiah 52 and 53 more striking?

Isaiah 52:13–53:1 introduces the poem with a preview containing a stunning contrast: the Servant will prosper and be exalted, but His appearance will be marred beyond recognition. Who can believe it?

Isaiah 53:2, 3 begins a painful descent from the Servant’s origin and ordinary appearance to His sorrow and rejection. Isaiah 53:4–6 pauses to explain that His suffering is really our punishment, which He bears to heal us. Isaiah 53:7–9 continues the innocent Servant’s descent to the grave.

In Isaiah 53:10–12, the Servant ascends to the exalted reward foreseen at the beginning of the poem starting in Isaiah 52:13, with the added insight that His sacrifice to save others is the will of God.

Compare this poem to the “valley” shape of Philippians 2:5–11, where Jesus begins in the form of God but descends by emptying Himself to take on the bondage of human form, humbling Himself down to death, and the lowest of all deaths: death on a cross. Therefore, God highly exalts Him so that everyone should acknowledge Him as Lord (*compare Isa. 49:7*).

Read Isaiah 52:13–53:12. Write down everything the poem says that Jesus has done for us. Dwell on what those actions in our behalf mean to us.

Who Has Believed? *(Isa. 52:13–53:12)*

In Isaiah 52:13, God’s Servant is highly exalted, but without warning, the next verse describes His appearance as so disfigured He cannot be recognized as one of the “sons of men.” The New Testament describes the factors that marred Jesus’ appearance, including scourging, a crown of thorns, crucifixion, but, above all, bearing the sins of the human race. Sin was never intended to be natural for humans; bearing it made the “Son of Man” appear inhuman.

Compare this with the story of Job, who suddenly plummeted from a position of great wealth, honor, and power to a miserable wretch sitting among ashes on the ground and scraping his painful sores with a potsherd (*Job 1, 2*). The contrast was so great that not even Job’s friends recognized him at first (*Job 2:12*). The question is: Why does Job suffer? Why must God’s Messiah suffer? Neither deserve it. Both are innocent. Why, then, the suffering?

Read through the verses for today’s study and write down the places where the theme of the innocent suffering for the guilty appears. What is the essential message there for us?

Look at the questions in Isaiah 53:1. These questions emphasize the challenge of believing the unbelievable (*compare with John 12:37–41*) and warn us to sit down for the rest of the story. But the questions also imply an appeal. In this context, the parallel between the two questions implies that the Lord’s arm or power of salvation (*compare with Isa. 52:10*) is revealed to those who believe the report. Do you want to experience God’s saving power? Then believe the report.

Look carefully at Isaiah 53:6. What is the specific message there? What is that text saying to you, personally, that should give you hope despite your past sins and failures?

The Unreachable Is Us! *(Isa. 53:3–9)*

Like a vulnerable plant, apparently of no special value, and despised (*Isa. 53:2, 3*)—that’s the depiction we are given here of the Suffering Servant. Isaiah has quickly brought us through innocent youth to the brink of the abyss. Even with the background provided earlier, we are not prepared in the sense that we are resigned to the Servant’s fate. To the contrary! Isaiah has taught us to cherish the Child born to us, the supreme Prince of Peace. Others despise Him, but we *know* who He *really* is.

As someone has said: “We have met the enemy and they are us.” The Servant is not the first to be despised, rejected, or a man of suffering. King David was all of those when he fled from his son Absalom (*2 Sam. 15:30*). But the suffering borne by this Servant is not His own and does not result from His own sin. Nor does He bear it merely for another individual; “the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (*Isa. 53:6, NRSV*).

The answer to the question “Why?” is Isaiah’s testing truth: *Because of God’s love, His Messiah would choose to suffer*. But why? Isaiah drives the “golden spike” in to complete the unthinkable truth: *He would choose to suffer in order to reach the unreachable, and the unreachable are us!*

Those who do not understand regard the Servant as “struck down by God” (*Isa. 53:4, NRSV*). Just as Job’s friends thought his sin must have caused his suffering, and just as Jesus’ disciples asked Him “‘who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ” (*John 9:2, NRSV*), those who saw Jesus on the cross assumed the worst. Didn’t Moses say that “anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (*Deut. 21:23; compare Num. 25:4*)?

Yet, all this was God’s will (*Isa. 53:10*). Why? Because “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (*Gal. 3:13, NRSV*). Because God “made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (*2 Cor. 5:21*).

“What a price has been paid for us! Behold the cross, and the Victim uplifted upon it. Look at those hands, pierced with the cruel nails. Look at His feet, fastened with spikes to the tree. Christ bore our sins in His own body. That suffering, that agony, is the price of your redemption.”—Ellen G. White, *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 172.

The weight, the guilt, the punishment for the sins of the whole world—every sin, by every sinner—fell upon Christ at the cross, at once, as the only means to save us! What does this tell us about how bad sin is, that such a price had to be paid in order to redeem us from it? What does it tell us about God’s love that He would do this for us, even at such a great cost?

A Transforming Reparation Offering

(Isa. 53:10–12)

What does it mean that the Servant’s life is “an offering for sin” (Isa. 53:10, NRSV)?

The Hebrew word refers to a “guilt” or “reparation offering” (*Lev. 5:14–6:7, Lev. 7:1–7*), which could atone for deliberate wrongs against other people (*Lev. 6:2, 3*). Such sins were singled out by Isaiah (*Isaiah 1–3; Isa. 10:1, 2; Isaiah 58*). Also, the sinner must restore to the wronged person that which was taken, plus a penalty, before offering the sacrifice to receive forgiveness from God (*Lev. 6:4–7; compare Matt. 5:23, 24*). In a case of inadvertent misuse of something that belongs to God, the reparation goes to Him (*Lev. 5:16*).

Now we can understand Isaiah 40:2, where God comforts His exiled people by telling them they have paid enough reparation for their sins.

But following the reparation, there must be a sacrifice. Here it is in Isaiah 53: God’s Servant, instead of a ram, is led like a sheep to the slaughter (*Isa. 53:7*) on behalf of people who have gone astray (*Isa. 53:6*).

Although “cut off from the land of the living” (*Isa. 53:8, NRSV; compare Dan. 9:26*), completely consumed in the sacrifice that kindles the flame of hope for us, the Servant comes forth from death, the land of no return, to receive exaltation; see His “offspring”; and prolong His days (*Isa. 53:10–12*).

Look up each of the following verses. How does each one reflect the same basic message as Isaiah 53?

Ps. 32:1, 2 _____

Rom. 5:8 _____

Gal. 2:16 _____

Phil. 3:9 _____

Heb. 2:9 _____

1 Pet. 2:24 _____

If someone were to ask you to summarize in a single paragraph the good news of Isaiah 52:13–53:12, what would you write?

Further Thought: “Christ bore our sins in His own body on the tree. . . . What must sin be, if no finite being could make atonement? What must its curse be if Deity alone could exhaust it? The cross of Christ testifies to every man that the penalty of sin is death. . . . Oh, must there be some strong bewitching power which holds the moral senses, steeling them against the impressions of the Spirit of God?”—Ellen G. White, *Our High Calling*, p. 44.

“The law of God’s government was to be magnified by the death of God’s only-begotten Son. Christ bore the guilt of the sins of the world. Our sufficiency is found only in the incarnation and death of the Son of God. He could suffer, because [He was] sustained by divinity. He could endure, because He was without one taint of disloyalty or sin. Christ triumphed in man’s behalf in thus bearing the justice of punishment. He secured eternal life to men, while He exalted the law, and made it honorable.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 302.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ **Isaiah 53:7–9 descends to the depths of the abyss: the Servant’s death and burial. How many aspects of these verses were fulfilled at the end of Jesus’ life?** (*Matt. 26:57–27:60, Mark 14:53–15:46, Luke 22:54–23:53, John 18:12–19:42.*)
- ❷ **Look at the last quote above by Ellen G. White about Christ’s death magnifying the law. What does she mean by that? How do we understand His death as proof of the perpetuity of the law?**

Summary: Having told about the birth, identity, and career of God’s Deliverer, Isaiah finally reveals the supreme tragedy that gives us hope: To reach, save, and heal lost people, including us, God’s Servant voluntarily bears our suffering and punishment.

Vodka for Easter

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Sergei Sokol, chief engineer at a beverage company in northern Kazakhstan, was pleased when a coworker declared during lunch break that people should celebrate Easter with a shot of vodka, painted eggs, and *kulich*, a traditional Easter bread in the Orthodox Christian faith. Many people in Kazakhstan celebrate Easter with vodka, painted eggs, and *kulich*.

“What does the Bible say about Easter?” Sergei asked.

The coworker didn’t know what to say. He had never read the Bible.

Sergei ran to his office and returned with a Bible. With the assistance of a concordance, he and several coworkers unsuccessfully searched for a mention of Easter as a holiday celebrating Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. But they did find numerous references to the Jewish Passover, which in their native Russian language has the same name as Easter: *paskha*. The only food that the Bible mentioned as being eaten at *paskha* was roasted lamb or goat with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

“Where is the vodka, painted eggs, and *kulich*?” a coworker exclaimed.

Sergei smiled. He liked those conversations. They led to Jesus.

Coworkers didn’t speak so openly about the Bible when Sergei first joined the company. He was open about being a Seventh-day Adventist, but his coworkers thought his faith was odd. “That guy is a sectarian,” they whispered.

Sergei did not mind the disdainful remarks and prayed for wisdom to share his hope in Jesus’ soon coming. He wondered how he could share literature. Then he remembered that every coworker had a birthday. He began to congratulate coworkers on their birthdays and to present them with gifts of Ellen White’s books *The Great Controversy* and *Steps to Christ*. Coworkers read the books and began asking questions at lunchtime.

When the local Adventist church opened an “urban center of influence” offering free massage therapy on its premises, Sergei invited coworkers to sign up. Three women came, and he gave them a tour of the sanctuary, small hall, and children’s room before the massage session. The coworkers praised

Adventists after receiving 10 days of massage therapy. “We thought you belonged to a sect,” one told Sergei during lunch break. “But it turns out that this is a church—and a good church.”

Sergei said he doesn’t feel like a missionary for sharing Jesus. “I don’t think that I’m doing anything special,” he said. “This is just what I do.”



Part of a 2017 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering helped open the first Seventh-day Adventist preschool in Sergei Sokol’s hometown, Pavlodar, Kazakhstan.

Waging Love



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 55:1–7; Isa. 55:6–13; Isa. 58:1–12; Isa. 58:13, 14.*

Memory Text: “If you extend your soul to the hungry and satisfy the afflicted soul, then your light shall dawn in the darkness, and your darkness shall be as the noonday” (*Isaiah 58:10, NKJV*).

A Jewish cantor (worship leader) and his wife who lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, began receiving threatening and obscene phone calls. They discovered the calls came from a leader of an American hate group, the Ku Klux Klan. Knowing his identity, they could have turned him in to the police. But they decided on a more radical approach. When they learned that he was crippled, they showed up at his door with dinner! He was utterly flabbergasted. His hatred melted before their love. The couple kept visiting him, and the friendship grew. He even thought of becoming Jewish!

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry . . . ?” (*Isa. 58:6, 7, NRSV*). Ironically, the couple in Lincoln kept such a fast by sharing their feast with a hungry *oppressor*, thereby setting him free from his own bonds of unjust prejudice!

Let's learn more about this important spiritual principle as depicted by the prophet Isaiah.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 13.

Buy Something Free? (*Isa. 55:1–7*)

Read this text: “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!” (*Isa. 55:1, NRSV*). What contradiction do you see there?

Suppose you took food and stood on the street in a big city and announced to the hungry and homeless there: “You who have no money, come, buy and eat!” (*NIV*). But how can they buy if they have no money?

However, if you add the words, as Isaiah did: “without money and without price” (*Isa. 55:1, NRSV*), the point becomes clearer. Isaiah appeals to people to accept forgiveness (*Isa. 55:7*) freely. Yet, the word “buy” emphasizes that what God offers people to meet their needs and desires is valuable; so, receiving it requires a transaction (transfer of something of worth). God freely offers forgiveness within the framework of a restored covenant relation with His people, but not because it was free for Him: He bought it at the terrible, blood-drenched price of His own Servant. Though free, it came at an astonishing cost to Himself.

What was the price for our salvation? (*See 1 Pet. 1:18, 19.*)

How does Isaiah’s approach to salvation compare with that of the New Testament? (*Eph. 2:8, 9.*)

Isaiah encapsulates the gospel in the Old Testament, and it is the same as the gospel in the New Testament. There was no “old-covenant” salvation by works, to be superseded by “new-covenant” salvation by grace. Ever since God’s promise of a Deliverer to Adam and Eve (*Gen. 3:15*), there has been only one way to salvation: by grace through faith (*Eph. 2:8*); “the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (*Rom. 6:23, NRSV*). From the ancient Gilgamesh, who did heroic exploits in a vain search for eternal life, to modern actors who believe in reincarnation, people have tried all kinds of different routes to salvation, but all are fruitless. This is why they need to know about Jesus and what He has accomplished for them at the cross.

Salvation is free in that there’s nothing we can do to earn it. Our works can never be good enough to save us. Yet, at the same time, it can cost us everything. What does that mean? (*See, for instance, Matt. 10:39, Luke 9:23, Luke 14:26, Phil. 3:8.*)

High Thoughts and Ways *(Isa. 55:6–13)*

Why does God say His thoughts and ways are higher than ours, “as the heavens are higher than the earth” (*Isa. 55:8, 9, NRSV*)? What do you think that means?

There’s no question that the God who created a universe in which even some of the simplest things contain mysteries that our minds cannot begin to fathom is a God whose ways are beyond what we can ever begin to fully grasp. This knowledge of His infinite superiority should, therefore, make it easier for us to humbly receive His help. (*See Isa. 57:15.*)

Read Isaiah 55:6–9. What is the context in which the Lord talks about how His ways and thoughts are higher than what we can imagine? What is He saying He does that is so hard for us to grasp?

Of all the great mysteries of the universe, no doubt the greatest one of all is the plan of salvation, a mystery we can only barely begin to understand. (*See Eph. 6:19.*) That the Creator of the universe would stoop to clothe Himself in humanity, live a life of toil and suffering, only then to die in our behalf, a sacrifice for sin, all in order that He could pardon us and show mercy to us is a truth that will thrill the hearts of God’s created beings for all the ages of eternity.

“The theme of redemption is one that angels desire to look into; it will be the science and the song of the redeemed throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity. Is it not worthy of careful thought and study now? . . .

“The subject is inexhaustible. The study of the incarnation of Christ, His atoning sacrifice, and mediatorial work will employ the mind of the diligent student as long as time shall last; and looking to heaven with its unnumbered years, he will exclaim, ‘Great is the mystery of godliness.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 360.

Look at the bad things you have done: the people whom you have hurt, the unkind words you have spoken, the ways in which you have disappointed others, not to mention yourself. And yet, through Jesus, you can be forgiven for all these things and stand, right now, perfect and righteous in the sight of God. If that isn’t a mystery, what is?

Fast Friends *(Isa. 58:1–8)*

What is the “fast” referred to in Isaiah 58:3?

This must be the fast of the Day of Atonement, the only fast commanded by God (*Lev. 16:29, 31; Lev. 23:27–32*). This is confirmed in Isaiah 58:3 by the parallel expression “humble ourselves” (*NRSV*), which follows the terminology of Leviticus. Humbling or afflicting oneself referred to various forms of self-denial, including fasting (*compare Ps. 35:13; Dan. 10:2, 3, 12*).

The Day of Atonement setting explains God’s command to “Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” (*Isa. 58:1, NRSV*). This kind of ram’s horn trumpet, called a shofar, was to be blown as a memorial or reminder 10 days before the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 23:24*). Furthermore, every fiftieth year, on the Day of Atonement, it was to announce the beginning of the jubilee year of freedom (*Lev. 25:9, 10; compare Isa. 27:13*).

Read Isaiah 58:3–7. What is the Lord complaining to them about? What was wrong with their “fast”?

It seems the people were expecting the Lord to congratulate them for their “piety.” Of course, they had it all backward. Practicing self-denial on the Day of Atonement was to express their gratitude and loyalty to Him on the day the high priest went before God to cleanse the sanctuary and thereby cleanse them from sins for which they had already been forgiven (*Leviticus 16, compare Leviticus 4*). Their acts should have been done in thankfulness and gratitude to the God who saved them in the day of judgment, not in order to get God’s approval for their “piety” and “devotion.” After all, it was the sins of the people that had defiled God’s sanctuary. It had to be cleansed with blood that was shed because of *what they had done*.

One of the crucial lessons that comes from these texts points to the difference between being merely religious and truly being a follower of Christ. How do we see the difference there? How do we, as individuals, face the same danger as the individuals presented here, which is believing that our religious rituals somehow show we are really following the Lord as He asks us to?

Fast Fight *(Isa. 58:1–12)*

Ten days after trumpet blasts have reminded God's people that the Lord is acclaimed as their King on the very Day of Atonement when their humility through self-denial is to affirm their loyalty to Him as King, the prophet lifts up his voice like a trumpet to declare that they are rebelling against Him (*Isa. 58:1*).

Read through Isaiah 58:6–12. What are acts that God considers true acts of self-denial? After all, what's harder: to skip a few meals or to use your own time and money to feed the homeless in your town? What is the principle to be seen behind these acts? How do these acts comprise true religion?

Anyone can be religious; anyone can go through religious rituals, even the right rituals, at the right time, with all the right formulas. But that alone is not what the Lord wants. Look at the life of Jesus. However faithful He was to the religious rituals of His time, the Gospel writers focused so much more on His acts of mercy, healing, feeding, and forgiveness to those in need than on His faithfulness to ritual.

The Lord seeks a church, a people, who will preach truth to the world. But what will better attract people to the truth as it is in Jesus: strict adherence to dietary laws or a willingness to help the hungry? Strict rest on the Sabbath or a willingness to spend your own time and energy helping those who are in need?

Read Matthew 25:40 and James 1:27. What do they tell us?

Look at the blessings in Isaiah 58 that God says will come to those who seek to minister to the less fortunate. What do you think the Lord is saying to us here? Are these promises of supernatural intervention in our lives if we do these things? Or, perhaps, is He telling us of the natural blessing we receive by giving of ourselves to others as opposed to being selfish, greedy, and self-absorbed? Explain your answer.

A Time for Us *(Isa. 58:13, 14)*

Why does Isaiah discuss the Sabbath in Isaiah 58:13, 14? What connection does this have with the Day of Atonement setting of the earlier verses?

The yearly Day of Atonement *was* a sabbath day. This special ceremonial sabbath was like the weekly Sabbath in that all work of any kind was prohibited (*Lev. 23:27–32*). Therefore, as recognized by early Seventh-day Adventists, the rule that the Day of Atonement period of rest lasted from evening to evening (*Lev. 23:32*) informs us that the same must be true of the weekly Sabbath. Similarly, although the primary context of Isaiah 58:13, 14 is the ceremonial Day of Atonement Sabbath, its message also applies to the weekly Sabbath.

Read Isaiah 58:13. What kind of day is the Sabbath supposed to be? How can we make our Sabbath experience like the one depicted here? Also, when you think about what the Sabbath represents, why should it be the kind of day described in this text?

Isaiah 58 deals with three main themes: self-denial, social kindness, and the Sabbath.

What are the connections between them?

First, all three involve concentration upon God, His priorities, and recognition of our dependence upon Him. Second, by doing all three, humans pursue holiness by emulating God (*see Lev. 19:2*), who, in the form of Christ, humbled Himself (*Phil. 2:8*), who demonstrates self-sacrificing kindness (*John 3:16*), and who ceased from labor on the Sabbath at the end of the Creation week (*Gen. 2:2, 3; Exod. 20:11*).

Look at these other ties between the themes of self-denial, social kindness, and the Sabbath as depicted in Isaiah 58: Sabbath freedom from weekly toil is kind to people because it lets them be refreshed (*Exod. 23:12, Mark 2:27*); Jesus showed that kind acts are appropriate on the Sabbath (*Mark 3:1–5, John 5:1–17*); true Sabbath keeping brings joy (*Isa. 58:14*), as does helping others (*Isa. 58:10, 11*). What must change in your own life in order to experience these blessings yourself?

Further Thought: “No one can practice real benevolence without self-denial. Only by a life of simplicity, self-denial, and close economy, is it possible for us to accomplish the work appointed us as Christ’s representatives. Pride and worldly ambition must be put out of our hearts. In all our work, the principle of unselfishness revealed in Christ’s life is to be carried out. Upon the walls of our homes, the pictures, the furnishings, we are to read, ‘Bring the poor that are cast out to thy house.’ On our wardrobes we are to see written, as with the finger of God, ‘Clothe the naked.’ In the dining room, on the table laden with abundant food, we should see traced, ‘Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry?’ Isaiah 58:7.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 206.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Look at the question Isaiah asked the people of his time: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” (*Isa. 55:2, NRSV*). Ask yourself, in what ways, if any, are we doing the same thing, laboring for that which does not satisfy? Why is it so easy to fall into that very trap?
- 2 If self-denial, social kindness, and the Sabbath were important on the Day of Atonement in Isaiah’s day, are they just as important in the end-time day of atonement (*Dan. 8:14*), during which God’s jubilee trumpet will signal ultimate freedom at the second coming of Christ (*1 Cor. 15:52; compare Lev. 25:9, 10*)? Explain your answer.
- 3 In class, open up a discussion on the question of Sabbath keeping. What do you think Isaiah means when he says we should turn away from doing our own pleasure on the Sabbath, and yet, at the same time, call it a delight (*Isa. 58:13*)? How can we do both? Keep in mind the context of the complete text of Isaiah 58.

Summary: In Isaiah 55 and 58, the prophet appeals to his people to give up their thoughts and ways and return to God, whose ideal for their happiness is so much higher than their own. He mercifully pardons and then insists that the pardoned be merciful, in harmony with the spirit of the Day of Atonement and the Sabbath, because the gift of God’s forgiveness, if it is truly received, transforms the heart.

Unequally Yoked

By ZENG-MEI CHANG

I didn't want to marry my husband because I was raised a Seventh-day Adventist and he belonged to another Christian denomination in southern Taiwan. But our parents wanted us to get married, and we had to obey them.

So, I told my future husband, Ming-Huang Wu, "We can get married, but I will not change my religion." He didn't have a problem with that.

But then we started to discuss the wedding. I wanted it to be held in an Adventist church, but he said, "No! I am the husband, so it should be in my church."

I tried to find a compromise. "Let's have the wedding outside then, not in any church," I said. "But an Adventist pastor must officiate at the wedding."

We argued back and forth. Finally, I said, "If it is not an Adventist pastor, then I will not marry you." He asked his mother for advice, and she gave permission for an Adventist pastor. But she had secret plans. She thought that I would join her faith after the wedding. She also wanted me to change her son, who drank.

I remained uncomfortable with the idea of marrying outside my faith, and I told this to Ming-Huang. But by that point the whole village knew about the wedding. If we called it off, we would lose face. Ming-Huang became an Adventist so he wouldn't lose face. A month before the wedding, he took Bible studies and was baptized. I'll never forget that day. He wept as he came out of the water because he wanted to get married, but he didn't want to leave his old life of drinking.

Ming-Huang was a beaten man. He lost a great deal of self-esteem by marrying me. During the first seven months of our marriage, I also fed him healthy food and taught him how to live a healthy lifestyle. Our neighbors noticed that he wasn't the same. "You're a new man," they said.

Ming-Huang, however, didn't want to be a new man. After our daughter was born, he returned to drinking.

Ten years passed, and we had a second daughter. We had many conflicts over faith. One day it was too much, and I took the two children, our baby and 10-year-old girl, to the home of friends. I wanted my husband to be alone in the house and to get a taste of what divorce would be like.

Ming-Huang didn't want a divorce. He looked for me for three days and, when he found me, changed his ways. He truly became a new man.



Today, he is a caring husband and father. He also is a church elder. However, I wouldn't follow this "missionary" path again. I married him because I thought I could change him with God's help. But the Bible is right when it says, "Do not be unequally yoked" (*1 Cor. 6:14, NKJV*). It's better to marry a spouse of your own faith. Solomon, the world's wisest man, learned this lesson the hard way. Me too.

Desire of Nations



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isaiah 59; Isa. 59:15–21; Isa. 60:1, 2; Isaiah 61; Isa. 61:2.*

Memory Text: “The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (*Isaiah 60:3, NKJV*).

We must learn in the school of Christ. Nothing but His righteousness can entitle us to one of the blessings of the covenant of grace. We have long desired and tried to obtain these blessings but have not received them because we have cherished the idea that we could do something to make ourselves worthy of them. We have not looked away from ourselves, believing that Jesus is a living Saviour. We must not think that our own grace and merits will save us; the grace of Christ is our only hope of salvation. Through His prophet the Lord promises, ‘Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon’ (*Isaiah 55:7*). We must believe the naked promise, and not accept feeling for faith. When we trust God fully, when we rely upon the merits of Jesus as a sin-pardoning Saviour, we shall receive all the help that we can desire.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 36.

This week we can see more of this great truth as revealed in the writings of the prophet Isaiah.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 20.

The Effects of Sin *(Isaiah 59)*

In Isaiah 58:3 the people asked God: “ ‘Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’ ” (*NRSV*).

In contrast, Isaiah 59:1 implies another question, something like: “Why do we call for the Lord’s hand to save us, but He does not? Why do we cry to Him, but He does not hear?” Isaiah answers that God is able to save and hear (*Isa. 59:1*). His failure to do either, however, is another matter entirely.

Read Isaiah 59:2. What message is being given here that answers the question in Isaiah 59:1?

God chooses to “ignore” His people, not because that is His desire but because “your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God” (*Isa. 59:2, NRSV*). Here is one of the clearest statements in the Bible regarding the effect of sin on the divine-human relationship. Isaiah spends the rest of chapter 59 elaborating on this point, which is seen all through human history: sin can destroy our relationship with the Lord and thus lead to our eternal ruin—not because sin drives God away from us but because it drives us away from God.

Read Genesis 3:8. How does this example reveal the principle expressed in the above paragraph?

Sin is primarily a rejection of God, a turning away from Him. The sin act actually feeds upon itself in that not only is the act a turning away from God but also the *result* of the act causes the sinner to turn away even more from the Lord. Sin separates us from God, not because God wouldn’t reach out to the sinner (indeed, the whole Bible is almost nothing but the account of God’s reaching out to save sinners) but because sin causes us to reject His divine overtures to us. That is why it is so important that we tolerate no sin in our lives.

In what ways have you experienced the reality that sin causes a separation from God? What, in your own experience, is the only solution to the problem?

Who Is Forgiven? (*Isa. 59:15–21*)

Isaiah 59 presents a startling picture of the problem of sin. Fortunately, the Bible also presents the hope of Redemption.

To begin, the first question is, How many of us have sinned? The Bible is unequivocal: all of us have. Redemption, therefore, cannot be based on lack of sin; it must be based on forgiveness (*Jer. 31:34*). Paul agrees. All have sinned (*Rom. 3:9–20, 23*); so, there can be no distinction on that basis (*Rom. 3:22*). Those who are justified can be judged as just, only because they receive by faith the gift of God’s righteousness through the sacrifice of Christ.

Read Romans 3:21–24. **What are these verses telling us about how we are saved? What hope should they give us in the judgment?**

Most people think the question in the judgment is: Who has sinned? But that is not a question that needs to be asked, because everyone has sinned. Instead, the question is: Who is forgiven? God is just when He justifies “the one who has faith in Jesus” (*Rom. 3:26, NRSV*). The deciding factor in the judgment is, Who has received and continues to receive forgiveness by having faith in Jesus?

Now, it is true we are judged by works—but not in the sense that works save us. If so, then faith is made void (*Rom. 4:14*). Instead, our works reveal whether we truly have been saved (*James 2:18*).

Why can’t works save us, either now or in the judgment? (*See Rom. 3:20, 23.*)

It is too late for good works, or obedience to the law, to redeem anyone. The purpose of the law in a sinful world isn’t to save but to point out sin. Instead, “faith working through love” (*Gal. 5:6, NRSV*), love that is poured into the heart by God’s Spirit (*Rom. 5:5*), demonstrates that a person has living faith in Jesus (*see also James 2:26*).

Works are an outward expression, the human manifestation of a saving faith. Hence, a true Christian experience is one in which faith is expressed in a daily commitment to the Lord that is revealed by obedience to the law. In the judgment, God uses works as evidence for His creatures, who cannot read thoughts of faith as He can. But for the converted person, only works following conversion, when the life is empowered by Christ and the Holy Spirit, are relevant in the judgment. The preconversion life of sin has already been washed away by the blood of the Lamb (*see Romans 6*).

Universal Appeal *(Isa. 60:1, 2)*

What is Isaiah 60:1, 2 talking about? What principle do you see at work there that's seen throughout the Bible? What hope does it offer?

In Isaiah 60:1, 2, we are given a picture of God's deliverance of His people, following the exile, expressed with the imagery of God's creating light out of darkness and pointing forward to an ultimate fulfillment in salvation through Christ.

In Isaiah 60:3, to whose light do nations and kings come?

In Hebrew this person is feminine singular (*see also Isa. 60:1, 2*). It must be "Zion," personified as a woman, who is mentioned near the end of the previous chapter (*Isa. 59:20*). So, the people of the earth, who are covered in darkness, will come to Zion. They will be drawn by the light of God's glory that has arisen over her (*Isa. 60:2*). "Zion is summoned to enter into the light that is hers and then to observe and react to the nations as they gather to the same light."—J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 494. Notice that although Zion is Jerusalem, the emphasis is more on the people than on the physical location of the city.

The rest of Isaiah 60 develops the theme introduced in verses 1–3: The people of the world are drawn to Jerusalem, which is blessed because of God's glorious presence there.

How does this prophecy compare with God's covenant promise to Abraham? (*Gen. 12:2, 3*.) Are they not saying the same thing?

God had a universal purpose when He chose Abraham and his descendants: Through Abraham all families of the earth would be blessed (*Gen. 12:3, Gen. 18:18, Gen. 22:18*). So, God's covenant with Abraham was ultimately intended to be a covenant with all humankind *through* Abraham. He and his descendants would be God's channel of revelation to the world.

Isaiah sought to bring his people back to their ancient, universal destiny. As the representatives of the true God, they were responsible not only for themselves but also for the world. They should welcome foreigners who seek God (*see also Isa. 56:3–8*), for His temple "shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (*Isa. 56:7, NRSV*).

In this context, how do you understand the role of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, or your role in that church?

“The Year of the LORD’s Favor” (*Isa. 61:2, NRSV*)

Who is speaking in Isaiah 61:1?

The Spirit of God is on this anointed Person, which means that He is a messiah or *the* Messiah. He is to “bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” (*Isa. 61:1, NRSV*). Whom does that sound like? Compare Isaiah 42:1–7, where God’s Servant is described in very similar terms.

Isaiah 61:2 talks about the “acceptable year of the LORD.” The Messiah, who is anointed as the Davidic King and Deliverer, proclaims a special year of divine favor at the time when He proclaims liberty. Compare Leviticus 25:10, where God commands the Israelites to proclaim liberty in the holy fiftieth year: “It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family” (*NRSV*). This means that persons who had been forced to sell their ancestral land or to become servants in order to survive hard times (*Lev. 25:25–55*) would reclaim their land and freedom. Because the jubilee year began with the blowing of a trumpet on the Day of Atonement (*Lev. 25:9*), we have mentioned this passage before in connection with Isaiah 58.

While “the year of the LORD’s favor” (*NRSV*) in Isaiah 61:2 is a kind of jubilee year, it is not simply an observance of Leviticus 25. This year is announced by the Messiah, the King, when He reveals Himself through a ministry of liberation and restoration. This is similar to some ancient Mesopotamian kings who promoted social kindness by proclaiming release from debts during early years of their reigns. The Messiah’s ministry goes far beyond the scope of the Leviticus 25 law. Not only does He “proclaim liberty to the captives” but He also binds up the brokenhearted, comforts those who mourn, and brings about their restoration (*Isa. 61:1–11*). Furthermore, in addition to “the year of the LORD’s favor,” He proclaims “the day of vengeance of our God” (*Isa. 61:2, NRSV*).

When was Isaiah’s prophecy fulfilled? (*Luke 4:16–21*.) How did Jesus’ ministry accomplish this? Also, ask yourself this important question: we, of course, are not Jesus. But we are to represent Him to the world. What are the things the Messiah does, as expressed in Isaiah 61:1–3, that we, in our limited capacities, should be doing, as well? And what are some of the practical ways in which we can do these things?

“The Day of Vengeance of Our God”

(Isa. 61:2, NRSV)

Amid all the good news, why does the Messiah, as depicted in Isaiah 61, proclaim God’s vengeance? When is this prophecy fulfilled?

When in Nazareth, Jesus, the Messiah, read Isaiah 61 as far as “to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor” (Isa. 61:2, NRSV; Luke 4:19, NRSV). Then He stopped and said, “ ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ ” (Luke 4:21, NRSV). So, He deliberately and specifically avoided reading the next words in the same verse: “the day of vengeance of our God” (Isa. 61:2, NRSV). While His ministry of good news, liberty, and comfort was beginning to set captives free from Satan’s tyranny, the day of vengeance was not yet to come. In Matthew 24 (compare Mark 13, Luke 21), He predicted to His disciples that divine judgments would come in the future.

Indeed, in Isaiah 61 the day of God’s vengeance is the “great and terrible day of the LORD” (Joel 2:31, NRSV; Mal. 4:5), to be fulfilled when Christ will come again to liberate planet Earth from injustice by defeating His enemies and setting the oppressed remnant of His people free (Revelation 19; compare Dan. 2:44, 45). So, although Christ announced the beginning of “the year of the LORD’s favor,” its culmination is at His second coming.

How do you reconcile the notion of a loving God with a God who also promises vengeance? Are the ideas incompatible? Or do you understand vengeance as a manifestation of that love? If so, how so? Explain your answer.

Though Jesus has told us to turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:39), elsewhere He is very clear that justice and punishment will be meted out (Matt. 8:12). Though Paul tells us not to “render evil for evil” (1 Thess. 5:15), he also says that when the Lord is revealed from heaven, with flaming fire He will take “vengeance on them that know not God” (2 Thess. 1:8).

The difference, of course, is that the Lord in His infinite wisdom and mercy can alone bring both justice and vengeance in a completely fair manner. Human justice, human vengeance, comes with all the faults, frailties, and inconsistencies of humanity. God’s justice, of course, will come with none of those limitations.

Which of the following incidents would make you more likely to want to see vengeance returned upon someone who does evil? (1) A person who hurts someone you do not love or (2) a person who hurts someone you do love? How do we understand the link between God’s love for us and the warnings of vengeance?

Further Thought: See also Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 376–378; also *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 236–243.

“Jesus stood before the people as a living expositor of the prophecies concerning Himself. Explaining the words He had read, He spoke of the Messiah as a reliever of the oppressed, a liberator of captives, a healer of the afflicted, restoring sight to the blind, and revealing to the world the light of truth. His impressive manner and the wonderful import of His words thrilled the hearers with a power they had never felt before. The tide of divine influence broke every barrier down; like Moses, they beheld the Invisible. As their hearts were moved upon by the Holy Spirit, they responded with fervent amens and praises to the Lord.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 237.

“The day of God’s vengeance cometh—the day of the fierceness of His wrath. Who will abide the day of His coming? Men have hardened their hearts against the Spirit of God, but the arrows of His wrath will pierce where the arrows of conviction could not. God will not far hence arise to deal with the sinner. Will the false shepherd shield the transgressor in that day? Can he be excused who went with the multitude in the path of disobedience? Will popularity or numbers make any guiltless? These are questions which the careless and indifferent should consider and settle for themselves.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 33.

Discussion Question:

A Seventh-day Adventist pastor thoughtfully stated that his number one problem in ministry is the exclusiveness of church members who do not want others to join them. How can “Christians” take the love, hope, and good news of Christ’s kingdom to all the world so that others can have an opportunity to be saved before the end comes (Matt. 24:14) when they do not even want to accept people who go out of their way to show up in their church?

Summary: God purifies an unjust society by removing the rebels and by restoring the remnant who turn from the sins that have separated them from Him. Due to the blessings of God’s presence, people from other nations are drawn to God and His people so that they also can enjoy the time of God’s favor that is proclaimed and delivered by the Messiah.

“I Want to Plant a Church”

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Julio Ovalle was bursting with enthusiasm when he returned home from a Global Mission conference organized for church members across Mexico.

He excitedly told his wife, María Díaz, about what he had learned at the event in January 2017. “Now I want to plant a church,” he said.

María liked the idea. “Let’s do it!” she said.

But where to start? Julio wanted to reach out to a new neighborhood, and he thought a good way to start would be to teach people about essential health principles such as air, water, sunshine, and rest. Julio and María won support from the North Mexican Union to work as volunteer Global Mission pioneers, and their church pastor also backed the plans. But some church members remembered that a previous attempt to plant a church had failed.

“This plan will never work,” said one.

“You won’t get any good results,” said another.

Julio, María, and their two adult daughters donned bright-green T-shirts bearing the name of the health program, “I Want to Live Healthy,” and began to knock on people’s doors. At each house, they invited people to sign up for health courses at home and healthy cooking classes at church.

The family worked intensively for four weeks and finally signed up the first person, a 60-year-old man named Rogelio, for Bible studies.

When church members saw the family’s diligence and learned about Rogelio, a few donned bright-green T-shirts and joined them in going door-to-door. Before long, the group swelled to 15 people.

The church members worked incessantly for six months. Seeing a growing number of people studying the Bible, Julio decided to form a small group to meet on Sabbath afternoons. He announced the plan to the church in February 2017 and invited more church members to join the effort. The church endorsed the small group, and 10 members accepted the invitation to get involved. Moreover, a church member who rented out a hall for birthdays and weddings offered the place free of charge to the small group. Twenty-five Bible-study participants showed up for the small group’s first meeting.



Three months after being endorsed as a small group, the local conference recognized it as a branch Sabbath School. Seventeen months later, in September 2018, it became a church. Today, Puerta del Cielo (Door of Heaven) Seventh-day Adventist Church has 35 members, including 24 people baptized through Julio and María’s health classes. Sabbath attendance reaches 50 people. Plans are under way to construct a church building. “Our goal is to raise up the church and to raise up more souls for the kingdom,” said Julio, 46.

Rebirth of Planet Earth



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 65:17–25, Isa. 66:1–19, Isa. 66:19–21, Isa. 66:21, Isa. 66:22–24.*

Memory Text: “‘For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind’ ” (*Isaiah 65:17, NKJV*).

One day, a 12-year-old boy, having just read a book on astronomy, refused to go to school. His mother took the child to the family doctor, who asked, “Billy, what’s the matter? Why don’t you want to study or go to school anymore?”

“Because, Doctor,” he said, “I read in this astronomy book that one day the sun is going to burn out and all life on earth will vanish. I don’t see any reason to do anything if, in the end, everything will die out.”

The mother, hysterical, shouted, “It’s not your business! It’s not your business!”

The doctor smiled and said, “But, Billy, you don’t need to worry, because by the time this happens, we’ll all be long dead, anyway.”

Of course, that’s part of the problem: in the end, we’re all dead, anyway.

Fortunately, our existence doesn’t have to end in death. On the contrary, we have been offered life, eternal life, in a world made new.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 27.

New Heavens and a New Earth *(Isa. 65:17–25)*

Read Isaiah 65:17–25. What kind of restoration does the Lord promise here?

God promises a new creation, beginning with the words: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (*Isa. 65:17, NRSV*). In this remarkable prophecy, the Lord promises to “create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight” (*Isa. 65:18, NRSV*). In the city there will be no more weeping (*Isa. 65:19*). People normally will live considerably longer than a century before they die (*Isa. 65:20*). Their work and children will remain for them to enjoy (*Isa. 65:21–23*). God will answer them even before they call (*Isa. 65:24*).

Nice as it is, why is this not a picture of our final restoration, our final hope?

Thus far we have a picture of tranquil long lives in the Promised Land. But even though people live longer, they still die. Where is the radical transformation of nature we expect with the creation of “new heavens” and a “new earth”? The next verse tells us: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD” (*Isa. 65:25, NRSV*).

For carnivores such as lions to become vegetarian requires far more than a vegetarian cooking class. It requires a re-creation to restore the world to its ideal state, as it was before sin in Eden introduced death.

Here in Isaiah 65, God presents the creation of “new heavens” and a “new earth” as a process, a series of steps, that begins with the re-creation of Jerusalem. Compare Isaiah 11, where the Messiah would bring justice (*Isa. 11:1–5*). Then, eventually, there will be peace on God’s worldwide “holy mountain”; the imagery used in Isaiah 11 is similar to what’s found in Isaiah 65: “The wolf shall live with the lamb . . . and the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (*Isa. 11:6, 7, NRSV*). Although the Lord’s “holy mountain” would begin with Mount Zion at Jerusalem, it was only a precursor, a symbol, of what God promises to do, ultimately, in a new world with His redeemed people.

Suppose instead of living 60, 70, 90, or even 100 years, most people lived a million years or more. Why, still, would the fundamental problem of humanity not be solved? Why is eternal life the only answer to our deepest human needs?

Divine “Magnet” (*Isa. 66:1–19*)

Read Isaiah 66:1–19. Keeping in mind the time in which Isaiah wrote, what is the basic message he is giving here?

Through the prophet, God reiterates the appeal and warning that permeates the book: God will save and restore the humble, who tremble at His Word (*Isa. 66:2, 5*). As in Isaiah 40:1, He will comfort them (*Isa. 66:13*). But He will destroy those who rebel against Him. These include hypocrites of ritual, whose sacrifices He rejects (*Isa. 66:3, 4; compare Isa. 1:10–15*), as well as those who hate and reject His faithful ones (*Isa. 66:5*). They also include those who practice pagan abominations (*Isa. 66:17*) such as those practiced at the temple in Jerusalem (*Ezek. 8:7–12*).

Look at Isaiah 66:3. What is this text saying? What spiritual principles are being revealed here? How might the same idea be expressed, but in the context of contemporary Christianity and worship?

How does God serve as a magnet to draw the nations to Himself? (*Isa. 66:18, 19.*)

Following the destruction of His enemies (*Isa. 66:14–17*), God reveals His glory so that He becomes a magnet to draw people to Jerusalem (*compare Isa. 2:2–4*). He sets a “sign” among them, which is not specified here but apparently refers to the sign last mentioned by Isaiah: God gives His people joy and peace and restores their land (*Isa. 55:12, 13*). When He reveals His glory by restoring His people after destruction, this is a sign of His restored favor, just as He gave Noah the sign of the rainbow after the Flood (*Gen. 9:13–17*).

Read Isaiah 66:5. What does it mean to tremble at His Word? Why does the Lord want us to tremble at His Word? If you don’t tremble, what might that say about the condition of your heart?

Missionaries and Worship Leaders *(Isa. 66:19–21)*

What is the meaning of survivors bringing people from the nations as an offering to the Lord? *(Isa. 66:19, 20.)*

God sends survivors of His destruction out to the ends of the earth, to people who do not know about God, “and they shall declare my glory among the nations” *(Isa. 66:19, NRSV)*. This is one of the clearest Old Testament statements on the theme of missionary outreach. In other words, not only are people to be drawn to the Hebrew nation but also some of the Hebrew people will go to other nations and teach them about the true God—a paradigm that is explicit in the New Testament. Though there was Jewish missionary outreach between the time of return from exile and the time of Christ *(Matt. 23:15)*, the early Christians spread the gospel rapidly and on a massive scale *(Col. 1:23)*.

Just as the Israelites brought grain offerings to the Lord at His temple, so the missionaries would bring an offering to Him. But their offering would be “all your kindred from all the nations” *(Isa. 66:20, NRSV)*. Just as grain offerings were gifts to God that were not slaughtered, the converts brought to the Lord would be presented to Him as “living sacrifices” *(compare Rom. 12:1)*. For the idea that people could be presented as a kind of offering to God, note the much earlier dedication of Levites “as an elevation offering from the Israelites, that they may do the service of the LORD” *(Num. 8:11, NRSV)*.

What is the significance of God’s promise to “take some of them as priests and as Levites” *(Isa. 66:21, NRSV)*?

The “them” in verse 21 refers to “your kindred from all the nations” *(NRSV)* in the previous verse. These are Gentiles, some of whom God would choose as worship leaders, along with the priests and Levites. This is a revolutionary change. God previously had authorized only descendants of Aaron to serve as priests and only other members of the tribe of Levi to assist them. Gentiles could not literally become descendants of Aaron or Levi, but God would authorize some to serve in these capacities, which had previously been forbidden even to most Jews.

Read 1 Peter 2:9, 10. To whom is Peter writing? What is he saying? What message does he have for each of us, as members of a “holy nation” today? Are we doing any better than the original people? *(Exod. 19:6.)*

Community of Faith *(Isa. 66:21)*

The Israelites were “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (*Exod. 19:6, NRSV*), with special priests set apart to represent them as worship leaders. But in the future, some Gentiles would become worship leaders (*Isa. 66:21*).

How would this change affect the renewed community of faith? (*See Matt. 28:19, Acts 26:20, Gal. 3:28, Col. 3:11, 1 Tim. 3:16.*)

In God’s “new world order,” Gentiles would not only join God’s people but they also would be equal partners with Jews in a combined community of faith that would be a “royal priesthood.” Therefore, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles would become functionally irrelevant.

When was this prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled?

Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, proclaimed: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, . . . for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (*Gal. 3:28, 29, NRSV*).

Becoming heirs of the promise and therefore an exalted “royal priesthood” was not a mandate for smug elitism but a commission to join the Jews in proclaiming “the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (*1 Pet. 2:9, NRSV; compare Isa. 66:19*).

The elevation of Gentiles did not entitle Jews to grumble that God was unfair in giving them the same reward. Nor did it entitle Gentiles to treat their Jewish brothers and sisters with disrespect, any more than workers hired later in the day should look down on those hired earlier (*see Matt. 20:1–16*). The Jews had first been “entrusted with the oracles of God” (*Rom. 3:2, NRSV*) as God’s channel of revelation. Paul wrote to Gentiles: “But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches” (*Rom. 11:17, 18, NRSV*).

In light of the Cross, in light of the gospel commission, why is any kind of spiritual or ethnic or even political elitism so abhorrent in the sight of God? Look closely at yourself; are you harboring any sense of spiritual or ethnic superiority? If so, repent!

So Shall Your Seed and Your Name Remain *(Isa. 66:22–24)*

Read Isaiah 66:22. What is the text saying to us? What hope can we find there?

One of the most wonderful promises in Isaiah is found in Isaiah 66:22. Read it carefully. In the new heavens and the new earth, our seed and our name shall remain—forever. No more blotting out, cutting off, grafting in, plucking up, or uprooting. We have here a promise of eternal life in a world made new—a world without sin, without death, without suffering, a new heaven and a new earth, the final and complete fulfillment of our Christian faith, the consummation of what Christ had accomplished for us at the cross.

Why are there new moons along with Sabbaths in the depiction of the new heavens and the new earth as presented in Isaiah 66:23?

Though there are a number of different ways to look at this difficult text, one approach is this: God created the Sabbath before the sacrificial system existed (*Gen. 2:2, 3*). So, although Sabbaths were honored by the ritual system, they are not dependent upon it. Thus, they continue uninterrupted throughout the restoration period, on into the new earth. There is no indication in the Bible that new moons were legitimate days of worship apart from the sacrificial system. But perhaps they will be worship days (but not necessarily rest days like weekly Sabbaths) in the new earth, possibly in connection with the monthly cycle of the tree of life (*Rev. 22:2*).

Whatever the specific meaning of Isaiah 66:23 may be, the crucial point seems to be that God's people will be worshipping Him throughout eternity.

Why does Isaiah end with the negative picture of saved people looking at the corpses of rebels destroyed by God? (*Isa. 66:24*.)

As a graphic warning to the people of his day, Isaiah encapsulates the contrast between faithful survivors of the Babylonian destruction and rebels, who would be destroyed. This is not everlasting torment—the rebels are dead, killed by “fire,” a destruction that was not quenched until it did its job so that the re-creation of Jerusalem could begin.

Isaiah's warning points forward to an ultimate fulfillment prophesied by the book of Revelation: destruction of sinners, Satan, and death in a lake of fire (*Revelation 20*), after which there will be “a new heaven and a new earth,” a holy “new Jerusalem,” and no more weeping or pain, “‘for the first things have passed away’ ” (*Rev. 21:1–4, NRSV; compare Isa. 65:17–19*), a new existence, with eternal life for all who are redeemed from the earth.

Further Thought: On the final cleansing of planet Earth from sin, read Ellen G. White, “The Controversy Ended,” in *The Great Controversy*, pp. 662–678.

“And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. As knowledge is progressive, so will love, reverence, and happiness increase. The more men learn of God, the greater will be their admiration of His character. As Jesus opens before them the riches of redemption and the amazing achievements in the great controversy with Satan, the hearts of the ransomed thrill with more fervent devotion, and with more rapturous joy they sweep the harps of gold; and ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of voices unite to swell the mighty chorus of praise.

“‘And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.’ Revelation 5:13.

“The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.”
—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 678.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why is the promise of eternal life in a new heaven and a new earth so basic to our Christian belief? What good would our faith be without that promise?
- 2 Read 2 Peter 3:10–14. How do these verses reflect the same idea presented in Isaiah 66?

Summary: Isaiah presents a vision of staggering scope. Not only would God purge and restore His community of faith but He also would enlarge its borders to encompass all nations. Ultimately the re-creation of His community would lead to the re-creation of planet Earth, where His presence would be the ultimate comfort of His people.

Tire Trouble

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Ilya Koltuk, a pastor and men's dean at Zaosky Adventist University in Russia, climbed into the car with his wife to go on a Black Sea vacation.

After about ten hours, the car started having tire trouble.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Ilya wasn't sure what was wrong.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

He stopped the car and got out. Standing over the tires, he couldn't see any problem. He prayed with his wife.

"Dear God, we are having trouble with the tires," he prayed. "Please help us."

Ilya slid behind the steering wheel and drove on.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

The noise grew louder and louder. Ilya and his wife had traveled 600 miles (1,000 kilometers). They couldn't easily turn around and go home. They still had 250 miles (400 kilometers) to go until they reached their destination.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Ilya prayed silently. Suddenly he sensed a male voice say, "Stop at that car-repair shop and go to the mechanics inside."

Startled, he looked out the window and saw a car-repair shop. He stopped and found two men sitting and talking as if they didn't have any work to do.

"Can you help me?" Ilya said. "My car is making noises."

The mechanics checked the car. They rotated the tires. They did other things.

"Get in," a mechanic said finally. "You can go."

"Thank you," Ilya said. "How much do I owe you?"

"Two hundred rubles," he said, or about US\$3.

Ilya found 200 rubles and a pocket-sized Gospel of John. He tucked the money in the book and handed it to the surprised mechanics.

"What is this?" a mechanic asked.

"The gospel," Ilya said.

The mechanics grew more surprised. "Are you a pastor?" one asked.

Ilya nodded.



The mechanics' faces lit up with joy. They took the 200 rubles out of the book and returned it to Ilya. One of them held up the book.

"God sent this book to us," he said. "We were just talking about God when you arrived."

Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help construct a grade school and high school building on the campus of Zaosky Adventist University in Russia.