

"See, I have purified you in the furnace of adversity, but not like silver--I have refined you in the fire! For My sake alone I will do it, so My name will not be dishonored! I will not yield My glory to another!" (Isaiah 48:10-11, Passion translation)

Remember last week's lesson on Isaiah 47? Where Isaiah wrote how God had spoken directly to the nation of Babylon, in strongly worded language, announcing that she "would no longer be called the 'queen of kingdoms,' but that--in an ultimate act of shame and humiliation--she should "take the millstones and grind grain, removing her veil and stripping off her skirt to uncover her nakedness and expose her shame"!

God had purposely given over Israel into the hands of the "daughter of the Chaldeans," as an act of judgment on His people, but Babylon, in her arrogance, did not show the proper mercy to them in their time of captivity, and even oppressed the elderly (something unacceptable even in that pagan culture)! And so, the God of Israel, the Commander of the Angel Armies (as He is sometimes called), determined to humble the Babylonians, by turning them over to the Medes and Persians, and to "redeem" His people from captivity! Humbling Babylon, just like He had earlier humbled Pharaoh, and the Egyptians, in the exodus!

The mark of Babylon's arrogance was that she thought she would be a "queen" forever, and had the audacity to think, in her prideful heart, and even to blatantly declare, that she was God, or like God! "I am! There is none like me," she dared to say! Choosing the very words God had used to describe His own identity! Words fit only to describe Almighty God, and for Him only to declare!

As a result, God said that she (Babylon) would "live as a widow, and suffer the loss of her children"! And it would "come upon her suddenly, despite her many sorceries and the power of her spells"!

"Try calling on your many sorcerers, and the witchcraft which you have practiced since your youth--and see if they can rescue you," God implored! "They will do nothing but disappoint you, and there will be no one to rescue you! Destruction would come upon them, God declared. and they "wouldn't even see it coming, or be able to charm it away"!

You can read all about how this prophecy was fulfilled, in Daniel 5, when God used the Medes and Persians, and Darius their king, in 539 B.C., to bring about an end to the Babylonian empire (for the time-being)! How can one not remember the account of that fateful night when Belshazzar the king and his cohorts were gleefully celebrating their conquests by drinking wine out of the sacred vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar from the temple in Jerusalem--when, suddenly, the handwriting appeared on the wall, declaring that they were "weighed in the balance and found wanting," and that their kingdom would be turned over to the Medes and Persians!

And with that, the Jewish prisoners would be freed from their captivity in Babylon and allowed to return to the land that God had given them!

And that set the scene for our lesson last night on Isaiah 48--where God reminds His people (again!) of all the "former things" He done for them! Things that He had "proclaimed beforehand that had come to pass! Including their deliverance from Babylon! All this and more, despite their history of obstinacy! And hypocrisy! And unfaithfulness to Him!

Wiersbe writes that "the most striking feature of Isaiah 48 is "the severity of its diagnosis of Israel"! Motyer calls it "the inevitable climax of a rising tide of awareness of Israel's sin and need,"...and sees the

Israelites as "congenitally rebellious"! MacArthur describes them as "nominal Israelites ...with hearts far from God"! Wow!

In Isaiah 48:1-2, God charges them with "invoking the name of the Lord and the God of Israel, but not in truth nor in righteousness"--and of being "obstinate...with the neck of an iron sinew and a forehead bronze"! (Constable notes these as picturing them as "unwilling to bow in submission to Him...and with the closed mind of a shameless person persisting in sin")!

And yet, after reprimanding them for their sin, He took the occasion to tell them that He would continue to reveal to them "new things" about the future! Things that He had "never before revealed to them"! And that, despite their sin--and "for the sake of His name and His praise," He would hold back His wrath and be patient with them--and (amazingly) "not cut them off" but, instead (He says in verses 10-11), "refine them (the Passion translation says "purify them"! ) but not as silver (else they would die!), and test them in the furnace of affliction"! Something, He said, He would do "for His own sake...so that His name would not be dishonored"!

What a beautiful demonstration (and representation!) of God's grace and mercy is displayed, in this Old Testament passage, where He refuses to abandon His people, or renege on His eternal covenant, at a time, and amid circumstances, where it's clear that He would be totally justified in doing so!

MacArthur notes that "His mercy toward them originates in His desire to be glorified and to display the integrity of His name"! Also noting that "from this point forward (in the book of Isaiah), the prophecies of the first and second comings of the Messiah, as well as of the restoration of Israel have a new distinction (in Scripture), with the Babylon of Isaiah becoming the Babylon of the Revelation, and God using Isaiah to communicate truth about the still to come Messianic kingdom on earth, and the new heaven and earth that will follow"! (All "new things"!)

Isaiah 48 then records God's own proclamation about His sovereignty and authority to do what He does, including "His good pleasure on Babylon"!!

"Listen to Me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I have called! I am He...the first and the last! Surely My hand founded the earth...and spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand together"! Then, in verses 14-15, He speaks of "the one He loves," who He called "to carry out His good pleasure on Babylon" (and it's not clear whether He's speaking of Cyrus, in the short term, or Christ in the long term, or both at the appropriate time)!

Isaiah 48 ends with reference to "the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel...who leads you in the way you should go"! And a chiding for a people who didn't do that! "If only you had paid attention to My commandments, then your well-being would be like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea; your descendants would have been like the sand, and all your offspring like its grains; their name would never be cut off or destroyed from My presence"! ("If only!" Ever said that to yourself? Or had it said to you?)

You still can, Israel! "Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the Chaldeans! Declare with the sound of joyful shouting! Proclaim it to the ends of the earth! Say, 'The Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob!' And He assured them that "they would not thirst when He led them through the desert"!

But, sadly, not all the Israelites who were captives in Babylon (for 70 years!) chose to return to the promised land! Wiersbe writes that "the Jews had become comfortable and complacent in their captivity and didn't want to leave"! They had perhaps taken the advice of Jeremiah (in Jeremiah 29:4-7)

too literally when he basically told them to "make themselves at home" during the 70 year stay! And so they had houses and gardens and families, and (at least some!) had become so attached to those things in Babylon that it wasn't easy for them to pack up and return to their land! (And that's a timely warning for the church today--and for us as well--that we not become so caught up with the comforts and affluence of this world, that we lose sight of "our home far away"! (God may put us through the "furnace of affliction" too, to remind us that we are here to be servants and not primarily consumers and spectators!)

And so we can better understand the closing refrain of this lesson: "There's no peace for the wicked," says the Lord! Noting that not all Israelites had enjoyed deliverance from Babylon, or would (or will) enjoy the Lord's salvation--but only the "faithful remnant who heeded God's call, and turned from their wicked ways"! (And, by the same token, the Bible makes clear that not everyone who calls themselves "Christian" in our day will enter into heaven!)

Like the Israelites of old, we all deserve God's judgment! But thank God for His amazing grace and mercy, and the "gift of His Son" (something "new" Isaiah himself would be inspired to write about in his coming prophecy)!

Motyer notes that "God has always been a God who saves, redeems, and withholds judgment, based on His character, and for His glory--not based on the behavior of people"!

And with all that, and speaking of God's grace, Ephesians 2:1-9 seems an appropriate passage to close off this lesson: "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the Spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience--among whom we all once lived, in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind! But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, make us alive together in Christ--by grace you have been saved--and raised up with Him and seated with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus! For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own but the gift of God, not a result of works, so that on one may boast!" The gift of God! Wow!

Merry Christmas, men!

Lowell