

"Two cities have been formed by two loves:

the earthly by the lover of self, even to the contempt of God;
the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self."

St. Augustine, DE CIVITATE DEI, Book XIV, Chapter 28

Augustine borrowed this from Isaiah.

And as we go through the oracles concerning the nations,
we are beginning to see more and more clearly the distinction
between the city of God
and the city of man.

Over the last few weeks

we have been looking at the oracles concerning the nations in Isaiah 13-23.

There are ten oracles in two groups of five.

We have looked at the oracles concerning Israel's neighbors:

Babylon, Philistia, Moab, Damascus, and Egypt.

Babylon alone will be able to defeat Assyria,
but they themselves will be destroyed by the hand of the LORD,
swept away with the broom of destruction.

We heard in chapter 20 a note of hope.

Egypt and Assyria will gather together to worship God with Israel.

But now we see a darker picture.

Now we are considering the final five oracles – particularly oracle 4:

Last time we heard the first three:

concerning the wilderness of the sea

concerning Dumah

concerning Arabia

Tonight we will hear the oracle concerning the valley of vision;

and then next week we will hear the oracle concerning Tyre.

The titles of these oracles are cryptic.

There are clear references to help us understand the historical situation,

but the cryptic titles point us beyond the historical situation

to the principles of divine justice.

And as we walk through the oracles concerning the nations,

we keep seeing the centrality of Zion over and over.

Isaiah sees that Jerusalem is becoming Babylon.

Jerusalem is *supposed to be* the city of God – Zion.

But Jerusalem keeps acting like Babylon – the city of man.

1. Isaiah's Grief Over the Destruction of Jerusalem (v1-4)

The oracle concerning the valley of vision.

What do you mean that you have gone up,

all of you, to the housetops,

²*you who are full of shoutings,*

tumultuous city, exultant town?

Your slain are not slain with the sword

or dead in battle.

³*All your leaders have fled together;*

without the bow they were captured.

All of you who were found were captured,

though they had fled far away.

⁴*Therefore I said:*

“Look away from me;

let me weep bitter tears;

do not labor to comfort me

concerning the destruction of the daughter of my people.”

The oracle concerning the valley of vision consists of two parts.

An address to Jerusalem (22:1-14),

and a message to the house of David through Shebna and Eliakim (22:15-25).

It is called an oracle concerning the valley of vision,

because of the blindness of the people.

They are rejoicing and celebrating—but they do not see what God is doing.

In the previous chapter – 21, verse 2 –

we heard “a stern vision” regarding the wilderness of the sea.

And we heard that Babylon was fallen.

In chapter 21, Isaiah said that “the twilight I longed for has been turned for me into trembling.”

He thought that he *wanted* to see the fall of Babylon.

But then he realized that Jerusalem would share the same fate as Babylon.

Indeed, Jerusalem had become Babylon.

Jerusalem was *supposed to be* the city God – Zion.

But instead, Jerusalem had become the city of man – Babylon.

And so the oracle of the valley of vision starts with a picture of Jerusalem

shouting and singing for joy.

The point of the Valley of Vision is that people are misunderstanding the signs of the times.

They *think* that everything is pointing in a victorious direction –

when in fact, it will end in their death.

The context of the oracle is the deliverance of Jerusalem from Assyria.

The people are celebrating.

Why are you celebrating, O Jerusalem?

Why do you exult in this temporary relief?

Isaiah will weep bitter tears concerning the destruction of the daughter of my people.

(Cities are often called the “daughter” so it is a reference to Zion.)

“For the Lord GOD of hosts has a day” (v5):

2. The Day of the LORD in the Valley of Vision (v5-14)

a. The Day of Tumult and Confusion (v5-8a)

⁵ *For the Lord GOD of hosts has a day
of tumult and trampling and confusion
in the valley of vision,
a battering down of walls
and a shouting to the mountains.*

Once again the Day of the LORD appears as a day of darkness and destruction.

“A day of tumult and trampling and confusion in the valley of vision,
a battering down of walls and a shouting to the mountains.”

The valley of vision should be a place where you see clearly!

But even in the Valley of Vision, the Lord GOD of Hosts has a day.

The day of the LORD will come in the valley of vision –
a day of tumult and trampling and confusion.

All that you trusted in will come crashing to the ground!

⁶ *And Elam bore the quiver
with chariots and horsemen,
and Kir uncovered the shield.*

⁷ *Your choicest valleys were full of chariots,
and the horsemen took their stand at the gates.*

⁸ *He has taken away the covering of Judah.*

Because Elam and Kir are coming.

Elam was an ally of Babylon, and an enemy of Assyria,
so this probably refers to the coming Babylonian invasion
that was still a century away.

Isaiah sees clearly that there is no protection on earth for Zion.

And so again he says “in that day” (verse 8):

b. In That Day: You Saw the Problem and Tried to Fix the Problem – But You Did Not Look to God (v8b-11)

In that day you looked to the weapons of the House of the Forest, ⁹ and you saw that the breaches

of the city of David were many. You collected the waters of the lower pool,¹⁰ and you counted the houses of Jerusalem, and you broke down the houses to fortify the wall.¹¹ You made a reservoir between the two walls for the water of the old pool. But you did not look to him who did it, or see him who planned it long ago.

But in that day, Judah did not trust in Yahweh.

Isaiah is using the perfect tense to speak of the future.

It is so certain that he speaks as though it had already happened
(sometimes called the prophetic perfect).

You looked to the weapons of the armory.

You saw the breaches of the city of David were many.

You did not look to him who did this.

Nor did you see him who planned it long ago.

In the valley of vision, in the midst of trials and tribulation,
where do you look?

Who do you see?

Verses 8-11 portray a people busy as bees preparing for the defense of the city.

They are hurry and scurry, but they do not look to God.

The reference to making a reservoir between the two walls
may refer to Hezekiah's tunnel

which he built in order to provide a water supply within the walls of Jerusalem.

All of the cleverness of the people, however,
will not avail to save them.

Their walls are strong, their weapons are sharp, and they have plenty of water...
so they do not think that they need faith!

But...

God was the one who formed the mountain of Jerusalem – Mt. Zion.

He created this part of the world as an aid to faith.

Canaan has always been a dry land.

It only became a land flowing with milk and honey through God's blessing.

To forget God is to set yourself up for disaster.

c. In That Day: the LORD Called for Weeping – But You Rejoiced (12-14)

¹² *In that day the Lord GOD of hosts
called for weeping and mourning,
for baldness and wearing sackcloth;*

¹³ *and behold, joy and gladness,
killing oxen and slaughtering sheep,
eating flesh and drinking wine.*

*“Let us eat and drink,
for tomorrow we die.”*

¹⁴ *The LORD of hosts has revealed himself in my ears:*

*“Surely this iniquity will not be atoned for you until you die,”
says the Lord GOD of hosts.*

And again he says “in that day” (v12)

And in that day the Lord GOD of hosts called for weeping and mourning.

But did you listen?

No, there was joy and gladness, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep,
eating flesh and drinking wine.

“Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!”

God calls for repentance, but the people respond with thanksgiving!

They do not think that they are going to die.

Isaiah is not reporting their words, when he says “tomorrow we die,”
but the attitude of their hearts.

They do not realize that they are at the brink of death,
but death will find them.

The people of God are not looking to God.

They are blind men living in the valley of vision.

And Yahweh declares that “this iniquity will not be atoned for you until you die.”

The people believe that they will be saved by their works,
but Yahweh declares that the wages of sin is death.

Just think for a moment:

¹⁴ The LORD of hosts has revealed himself in my ears:

*“Surely this iniquity will not be atoned for you until you die,”
says the Lord GOD of hosts.*

What can save Jerusalem?

Trying harder?

No.

Obeying God?

No.

Ah, we’re good Protestants: how about faith?!

NO!

This iniquity will not be atoned for until you die.

What can save Jerusalem?

Isaiah is preaching the *gospel* to Jerusalem!

What can save you?

What can make *atonement* for your sin?

Faith does not atone for sin!

Obedience does not atone for sin.

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!

Nothing but *death*.

This iniquity will not be atoned for until you die.

This means that we have a problem!
If the wages of sin is death –
and if atonement requires death –
then how can we live?

Isaiah is beginning to see the heart of humanity's problem!

Yes, we have a sin problem –
but even more, we have a *death* problem!

The book of Hebrews understands what the valley of vision was all about.
“At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.
But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels,
namely, Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death,
so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” (2:8-9)

It is only if God himself takes our sin – *and our death* – upon himself –
that we can live.

In order to illustrate this,
God tells Isaiah to go talk to the Prime Minister:

3. A Secure Peg: The Steward of the House of David (v15-25)
a. The LORD's Judgment against Shebna – the “Shame of Your Master's House” (v15-19)

¹⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD of hosts, “Come, go to this steward, to Shebna, who is over the household, and say to him: ¹⁶ What have you to do here, and whom have you here, that you have cut out here a tomb for yourself, you who cut out a tomb on the height and carve a dwelling for yourself in the rock? ¹⁷ Behold, the LORD will hurl you away violently, O you strong man. He will seize firm hold on you ¹⁸ and whirl you around and around, and throw you like a ball into a wide land. There you shall die, and there shall be your glorious chariots, you shame of your master's house. ¹⁹ I will thrust you from your office, and you will be pulled down from your station.

Once again Isaiah connects the distant future with the present.
The future of Jerusalem will be prefigured in the present by Shebna and Eliakim.
Shebna was the steward of the house of David (the prime minister).
But the word for “steward” here has the idea of a fawning lackey,

rather than a royal figure.
Shebna is “over the household”—and seems to have enjoyed his position.
He rode in a glorious chariot and had planned a splendid tomb
to memorialize his name forever.

Shebna appears also in 2 Kings 18 (which we will about later in Isaiah 36-37).
He was sent by Hezekiah to confer with the Assyrian ambassadors –
and from all we know about Shebna,
he appears to have been in favor of an Egyptian alliance against Assyria.

It is particularly noteworthy that he is condemned for building a grand tomb for himself –
because in 1870 a grand tomb was discovered in a village outside Jerusalem
with an inscription that seems to refer to Shebna, the royal steward!

But Isaiah declares that Yahweh is going to cast him down. (17-19)
And in his place he will put Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, (20-24)

**b. The LORD’s Call to Eliakim – the “Honor of His Father’s House” Will
Collapse (v20-25)**

²⁰ In that day I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, ²¹ and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your sash on him, and will commit your authority to his hand. And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. ²² And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open. ²³ And I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his father's house. ²⁴ And they will hang on him the whole honor of his father's house, the offspring and issue, every small vessel, from the cups to all the flagons.

By Isaiah 36, Eliakim will be “over the household” – the prime minister –
and Shebna will be simply “the scribe” (the secretary).

Here Eliakim is praised as a strong and noble figure.
All the people will look to him as “a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”
He holds the key of the house of David.
He is a secure peg.
He will become a throne of honor.
Eliakim is everything a steward should be.

Think of what it means to be a secure peg.
In most houses, there is a coat rack where you hang your hats and coats.

A peg in a secure place can handle a lot of weight!
Shebna was a flimsy peg.
But Eliakim will be like a peg in a secure place!

This is sounding pretty good, right?
Finally, a secure peg!

But in that day (verse 25)

²⁵ In that day, declares the LORD of hosts, the peg that was fastened in a secure place will give way, and it will be cut down and fall, and the load that was on it will be cut off, for the LORD has spoken.”

Eliakim cannot hold the weight of the house of David.
He is a strong peg,
but he was not designed to be the Messiah.
He is not the deliverer.

ONLY GOD CAN SAVE!!
Even the best of men is still mortal.
He may be a good and wise steward,
but he is not the Son of David.
He is not the Messiah.

We need God to come in our flesh and save us.

It might seem as though Isaiah is a fatalist.
You're all going to die – so what's the point?!

And yet – as we saw earlier, Isaiah condemns the fatalism of Jerusalem:
“Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die”!

Isaiah clearly rebukes those – like Shebna – who seek their own glory.
And he also warns that even the faithful – like Eliakim –
will fall short.

How shall we then live?
I think that J. R. R. Tolkien said it well through the voice of Gandalf:

“Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.”

We are never going to be able to “fix” everything.
This is a foundational problem of our day!
We live in a culture that is trying to fix everything!
And so we start wars.

The war on poverty was supposed to end poverty.

The war on drugs – the war on crime –
it all started with the “war to end all wars!” (World War 1)

We are not going to *master* any of these things!
They are all too big for us.

So what *can* we do?

Well, to use Gandalf’s example:
We can destroy the ring.
We can take down Sauron.

As Gandalf had said just before the quote I read:
Sauron was but an emissary.
When Frodo destroyed the ring, it didn’t *end evil* –
it just ended that one particular evil person.

We can deal with the *particular thing* that we are facing.

We are not going to produce a “final solution.”
That is what our Lord Jesus will do when he returns!

What we *can* do is love God!
What we *can* do is love our neighbor.
What we *can* do is help *this* poor person – and remove *that* evil person from power.

We can uproot particular evils in particular places.

Paul says it well in 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12:

*Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you,
for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,
for that indeed is what you are doing
to all the brothers throughout Macedonia.
But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more,
and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs,
and to work with your hands, as we instructed you,
so that you may walk properly before outsiders
and be dependent on no one.*

One commentator says it nicely:

“The Christian life is countercultural in this way.
It does not look like a cycle of drastic upheavals or violent riots:
it is the quiet revolution of lives lived in peace,
working faithfully and walking properly before outsiders.
It is a quiet resistance of hatred and selfishness,
committing ourselves to the love of one another.

It is the consistent commitment to repent of our own sins
and refuse to tolerate unrighteousness in our midst,
no matter how much it may benefit us in terms of power,
influence, or riches.

It does not ignore the little foxes that terrorize our gardens.

It does not turn a blind eye to evil.

It does not make deals with the devil.

The sheep do not make alliances with the wolves.”

<https://griffingulledge.com/2021/02/13/uprooting-evil-in-the-fields-we-know/>

The problem is that this is what happens when Christians feel like we need to go to war!

This is the counsel of Saruman –

we need to use the weapon of Sauron against him!

So long as you think that *we can slay this enemy* by our strength and tactics –
then you will be tempted to use the enemy’s weapons against him.

But Tolkien understood that it is the weak and foolish things of the world
that rise up and shame the wise and the strong.

The early church saw this as well!

They did not seek to overthrow Rome!

They did not *fight* – they did not *rebel* –

They simply followed Jesus –

they followed the pattern of the cross!

If we think that we can defeat the City of Man by using their own weapons –
then we will become like the City of Man.

Isaiah, from the Valley of Vision, saw that this was happening to Jerusalem.

May God grant us the humility to see it as well!