

“A Tale of Two Cities”
Isaiah 26:1-21
January 27, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

The theme of the first half of Isaiah is trusting God. Isaiah prophesied to the nation of Judah of their need to trust God because they were not doing so. They were trusting other nations or themselves, but not God. Isaiah 26 talks about trusting God by speaking of two different cities with two different futures. There is a city of God with walls of salvation, inside of which its citizens are safe from all enemies, including the judgment of God. **“We have a strong city; he sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks”** (v. 1). A bulwark is one of those massive walls built for defensive purposes, consisting of mounds of earth and large timbers. And there is a city of this world which is characterized by pride. That city will be destroyed, together with all who take refuge there. **“For he has humbled the inhabitants of the height, the lofty city. He lays it low, lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust”** (v. 5).

Saint Augustine wrote one of the most important books of the first 500 years of the church called *The City of God*. The occasion of its writing was the fall of Rome in 410 to the Barbarians. Many were saying that Christianity was the cause of this, because it was the Christians who were largely responsible for the overthrow of the pagan gods and of emperor worship. Now these jilted gods had removed their hand of protection from Rome. Augustine answers that charge in many different ways, but one of them is to attempt to develop a biblical philosophy of history. He says that history is linear, not cyclical as the Greeks believed. And he finds the organizing principle of all history to be the idea of these two cities that we find in this chapter: the city of God and the city of this world. Like Isaiah in our chapter, he was using the idea of a city in a figurative sense. Isaiah does not mean us to view the literal Jerusalem as this strong city of salvation. Like Augustine, Isaiah views the city of God as that grouping of people who love and trust God, and the city of this world as those who love and trust themselves. But it wasn't as simple as saying that the church is equivalent to the city of God and the State to the city of this world. The city of God exists wherever there are people who love God, whether that is in the Church or the State. And if a church has no one who loves God, then it is the city of this world more than the city of God.

These two cities have different futures. Though the city of this world may seem to prosper and have everything going for it, there is no future in it. It will be brought down. And though the city of God may often seem to be barely surviving, it will in the end prevail. The entire earth will one day become the great city of God, and all things—culture, State, Church—will exist for the glory of God. Isaiah's purpose is to describe the primary feature of the citizens of God's city, and he describes them as those who trust in God. **“Trust in the Lord forever,**

for the Lord God is an everlasting rock” (v. 4). I would like for us to note three features of this trust in God.

I. Relying on God in the Everyday Affairs of Life

Trusting in God is not something that is done only once when a person becomes a Christian. Rather, it is a lifestyle. Notice verse 3. **“You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.”** When he says that his mind is stayed on God, it is referring to a way of looking at life that keeps God in the center of things. This view of life sees the promises of God as the most reliable thing in all the earth. As he says in verse 4, these promises are like a rock because they are anchored in God. **“For the Lord God is an everlasting rock.”**

When we were in Austria a couple of weeks ago, Wendy and I were privileged to stay in a 12th century castle high up in the Austrian Alps. It was built halfway up a mountain, with a steep ascent required to reach it from every side. As I was climbing the mountain one day to reach the castle, I imagined myself as part of an army with the job of attacking that castle. It would be a nearly impossible task, which is the whole point of a castle. It is constructed of large stones, with very thick walls, interspersed with small holes from which it could be defended. It had only one means of ingress, a long tunnel with a large door at the end of it. God’s promises are just like that—the most reliable thing in the universe. A life of trust is one that goes to God every day and asks him to do as he has said in his promise. So when we read in Isaiah 1:18, **“Come now, 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 become like wool,”** to trust God is to grasp that promise and ask God to do as he has said he will do. This kind of trust doesn’t say, “I must first do what I can to cleanse myself before going to God.” It simply goes and takes God at his word.

I like what Charles Spurgeon said about this. “Our heavenly Banker delights to cash His own notes. Never let the promise rust. Draw the word of promise out of its sheath and use it which holy violence. Think not that God will be troubled by your importunately reminding Him of His promises. He loves to hear the loud outcries of needy souls. It is His delight to bestow favors. He is more ready to hear than you are to ask. The sun is not weary of shining, nor the fountain of flowing. It is God’s nature to keep His promises” (January 15, *Morning and Evening*).

Spurgeon is right. We must use God’s promise, lest it become a rusty sword. I find this much easier said than done. I must confess that my instincts on this are all wrong. When confronting an anxiety-producing situation, instead of drawing the sword of God’s promise, I tend to rely on my own resources and leave that sword sheathed. So if my children are in need, I just worry and scheme instead of going to God in prayer. As those who trust God, our need is to find the promises of God in his word and apply them to our lives. This is what Isaiah means when

he says, **“whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.”** Isaiah’s point is that Judah’s fatal mistake was that they were not doing this. Instead of trusting God, they were trusting in the nations around them.

Note the promise of verse 3. **“You keep him in perfect peace.”** The fruit of trust in God is a perfect peace. There are many forms of imperfect peace. There is a false peace of the person relying on himself. As soon as something major goes wrong, that peace is shattered. There is the temporary and shaky peace that comes through denial. “It didn’t hurt to lose that friendship. I’ll just make a new friend.” The perfect peace promised by God is not a peace without pain. It is the peace of knowing that there is a city of God with salvation as its walls and bulwarks. It is believing that in Jesus, God is for me. But what about the reversals in life, the deep suffering that sometimes come to God’s people? This brings us to our next point.

II. Waiting on God in the Suffering of Life

How can Isaiah say that **“the path of the righteous is level”** (v. 7), when it is so full of suffering? If you’ve ever done much bike-riding, then you are very familiar with this metaphor of level ground. While it may be fun to gather speed so effortlessly while going downhill on a bicycle, every rider knows that the short-lived downhill is inevitably followed by a slow and arduous uphill. It is much easier to have the level path, which is what Isaiah says God gives to his people. But Isaiah also acknowledges the reality of suffering among the citizens of God’s city. Note verse 16. **“O Lord, in distress they sought you; they poured out a whispered prayer when your discipline was upon them.”** And verses 17-18 liken their suffering to that of a pregnant woman in the late stages of labor, which any woman can tell you is the worst part. Yet Isaiah says that their path is level. How can this be?

Commentator Alec Motyer was helpful in saying that “places rough in prospect are smooth in retrospect.” In other words, while life in the middle of suffering may feel anything but level, once we look back on it with a bigger perspective, it will be evident to us that it was a great kindness from God. Suppose you have booked passage on the maiden voyage of the Titanic. You are very excited about it and can’t wait for the day of departure for your trans-Atlantic voyage. But then two days before the ship departs, you get so sick that you can’t even get out of bed. You are greatly distressed, and it seems to you anything but a level path that you should be denied this voyage. Two weeks later, after news of the sinking of the ship reaches your ears, your anger has been turned to thanksgiving to God.

There is a mystery in our suffering that belongs to God and that he doesn’t reveal to us. It is part of the life of faith to accept this mystery. There is an old story about a wise old man living in China. One day, the horse belonging to his son was stolen by nomads across the border. Everyone offered consolation to the

father and his son for their loss. But he replied to them, “What makes you so sure this is not a good thing that has happened to us?” Several months later, the horse returned, bringing with her a magnificent stallion. Now his friends congratulated him on his good fortune to receive such a valuable animal. But he said to them, “What makes you so sure this isn’t a disaster?” One day the son fell off this stallion and broke his hip. During his convalescence, many stopped by to offer their consolation to him. Again, the wise father said, “What makes you so sure this isn’t a great blessing visited upon us.” A year later, a foreign army attacked and every able-bodied man was required to serve. Nine out of ten soldiers died, and it was only because this son was lame that he wasn’t forced to serve. We simply cannot know whether a particular suffering is bad or whether a seemingly favorable circumstance is good. All we can know is what God tells us, and he says that the path of those who trust him is a level path.

Verse 8 tells us what we are to do during any suffering that may come our way in life. **“In the path of your judgments, O Lord, we wait for you.”** Did you notice that it didn’t say we wait for deliverance, but we wait for the Lord? We have very little control over what happens to us in life. But we do have control in this area of waiting on the Lord. During the suffering times of life, we look for God, knowing that his presence is the true blessing of life. We usually have no control over when the suffering ends. We simply look to God and say to him, “God, you are the author of today’s path for me. If you will walk with me today, I can make it. If not, then I can’t take so much as one step.” Many of you know what this feels like to wait on God in the midst of suffering. Corb Heimburger wrote the following in a prayer letter to our presbytery for those who had prayed for him during his brain tumor surgery. “We sensed Jesus’ invitation to walk with him through the pain, not just hunker down and wait for it to pass, hoping to find him on the other side. As a result, Jesus became more precious to us than ever before.” Perhaps there are many of you who have a deep sense of the truth of that song we sing: “You, who long pain and suffering bear...” It may be a significant physical or emotional illness. It may be a loved one who is not walking with the Lord but making a series of self-destructive decisions. It may be a troubled marriage or a troubled career.

To trust God is to wait on him during such a time of suffering. There are many biblical examples of people doing just that. Abraham and Sarah waited through 25 years of Sarah’s barrenness for the promised son to be born, until Sarah was 90 years old. Imagine the public and private humiliation they both must have endured. But their suffering transformed them into a man and woman of great faith. Consider David after his anointing by Samuel as Israel’s next king and his great victory over Goliath. This young shepherd was then forced to run for his life from King Saul for over ten years, wandering as a poor man in the wilderness. To trust God is to wait on God.

III. Hoping in God When the Story Ends Badly

The end of the chapter talks about a woman in labor, writhing in pain and crying out because the pain is so great. Of course, women have gone through this billions of times. Most are sustained by the prospect of a baby being born at the end of the pain. But Isaiah imagines a different outcome. After hours of labor pain, only wind comes forth, not a baby. This is the troubling case of a story with an unhappy ending. Have you ever seen a movie that ends like this? It is very unsatisfying. What does trusting God look like in that situation? The marriage ends in divorce. The loved one who is sick is not healed. The rebellious child moves into adulthood still far from the Lord. Isaiah tells us in verse 19. **“Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!”** There is a sense in which this is the story of us all. Your story will end badly. You will be like Job, except your losses will occur more slowly than his. But in the end you will lose everything—your health, your money, your friends and all your possessions. You will lose your marriage. Either I will stand at Wendy’s funeral or she will stand at mine. After a lifetime of labor pains, we will give birth to the wind. But listen, that’s not the end. We serve a God who raises the dead, and we will sing for joy.

One of the missionaries we were with in Austria serves in London. He explained to us what a great challenge it is to share the gospel with people who have a deeply-held conviction that Christianity is not part of the solution for this world’s ills, but a central part of the problem. As he speaks to people, he said that his only hope is that the God who raises the dead will in his time and his way open the eyes of some to see the truth that is found in Jesus.

This element of putting our hope in the God who raises the dead is both the most advanced part of trust and also the most basic. It is the most basic because you can’t have a relationship with God without recognizing that you are spiritually dead and completely unable to cleanse any of your own sins. Your heart needs changing, and you are as powerless as a dead man. But the God who raises the dead can both forgive your sins and change your heart.

CONCLUSION:

In this context of trusting God, the Lord’s Supper speaks to us in two very important ways. First, it teaches that God knows how to fill our sufferings with meaning, just as he did in the case of Jesus. Jesus’ sufferings have become redemptive. From a human perspective, everything that could go wrong in his life did go wrong. But from God’s perspective, it was Jesus’ sufferings that brought salvation to the world. God knows how to use sufferings for good. Second, the Lord’s Supper teaches us that God can raise the dead. The Jesus who suffered and died is alive now. This meal that we share now looks forward to the one he will host in heaven for an eternity. So as we partake of this meal today, I want to ask you to take your suffering to Jesus and ask him to help you trust him.