

Making Sense of History

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[0 : 00] Anyway, we're going to turn out our Bible reading, which you'll find on page 573, if you're using the Church Bibles. Over the last weeks, we've started a study in this great prophet, the prophet Isaiah, and we've seen how in difficult, dangerous times, he has proclaimed a message of hope.

A message of hope that's going to culminate in the coming of a child called Emmanuel, who is going to come from the line of David, and who is going to rule, not just in Israel, but going to rule over the whole world.

Now, this passage we're reading today is a long passage. We're going to read chapter 9, verse 8 to 1034. I'm not going to read the whole passage, but I'll read a large part of it. And remember Isaiah is living in threatening times.

The great Assyrian Empire up there on the Tigris is becoming more and more belligerent, gobbling up all the nations. And Isaiah is warning his people of the dangers of disobedience and the safety that lies in trusting the Lord.

That's the underlying theme of this passage. So, chapter 9, verse 8, page 573. Prophet writes, But the Lord has sent a word against Jacob, and it will fall on Israel, and all people will know.

[1 : 29] Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria, who say in pride and in arrogance of heart, the bricks have fallen, but we will build with the rest stones. The sycamores have been cut down, but we will put cedars in their place.

But the Lord raises the adversaries of Rezin, that's the king of Syria, against him, and stirs up his enemies. The Syrians on the east and the Philistines on the west devour Israel with open mouth. For all that, his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still. It continues in that vein where the prophet says, You've been disobedient, and because you've been disobedient, you're in mortal danger.

Now you come down to chapter 10, verse 5, on the following page. It's not just God's people who are going to be judged, it's the Assyrian oppressor.

Chapter 10, verse 8, He says, He says,

[5 : 57] And in that day, his burden will depart from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck, and the yoke will be broken because of the fat. Now a passage describes the terrifying approach of the Assyrian army.

He has come to Iath. He passes through Migron. At Michmash, he stores his baggage. They have crossed over the pass. At Geba, they lodge for the night.

Ramah trembles. Gibeah of Saul has fled. Cry aloud, O daughter of Gawlim. Give attention to Elisha. O poor Anathoth. Madmoniah is in flight.

The inhabitants of Gebin flee for safety. This very day, he will halt at Nob. He will shake his fist at the mountain of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem.

Behold, the Lord God of hosts will lock the boughs with terrifying power. The great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low.

[6 : 56] He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon will fall by the majestic one. Amen. Amen. This is the word of the Lord.

Now, if please we could have our Bibles open, that passage we read, and we'll have a moment of prayer. Amen. And Father, we ask that your gracious Holy Spirit, who inspired these words, will now speak them to our hearts, so that what we hear is not simply the voice of Isaiah in the 8th century BC, but the voice of the Lord, speaking not only then, but speaking now to us in our day, and speaking that same word to challenge, to encourage, and to lead us on in our Christian pathway.

We ask this in the name of him who is the living word, the Lord Christ himself. Amen. Amen. Some of you may have visited the Assyrian rooms in the British Museum.

If you haven't, and you're ever down that way, they are most certainly worth a visit. The whole museum is, but the Assyrian rooms are especially impressive. Thelma and I visited there last summer, and we went to these rooms.

Now, as you go into the rooms, there are two gigantic sculptures from one of the ancient Assyrian cities. Gigantic, bull-shaped figures with a man's head, the head of one of the Assyrian kings.

[8 : 49] Now, even in the sanitized surroundings of a 21st century museum, these figures are awesome and terrifying. And when they were looked upon by the races, the nations from the Assyrians subdued, they must have been absolutely intimidating and terrifying.

As I was well aware of this, in chapter 10, the chapter we read, in chapter 10, verse 13, he says this, The Assyrian king brags, I remove the boundaries of peoples and plunder their treasures. Like a bull, I bring down those who sit on thrones. The Assyrian menace, the terrible and frightening power of this super state, which was grabbing up the little communities throughout the Middle East. And the first thing I want to say is this, that Isaiah lived in dangerous times, in confusing times. So do we.

Our personal lives are often a muddle, aren't they? The communities we belong to, the fellowships we are part of, are very often confused and perplexed and can't quite see the way ahead.

[10 : 11] That's even before we get to the national and international scene. Think of the continuing powder keg in the Middle East, the Islamic State. Think of the world powers circling each other uneasily.

I read a book some time ago called The World in a Hundred Years, which addressed that kind of issue and talked particularly of the growing power of China and predicted that China and Mexico would be the greatest powers in a hundred years.

None of us here, not even the youngest, are probably going to be around to know whether that prediction was right. Think of the turmoil in our own politics.

It's just over two months ago that the country voted to leave the European Union. And we have no idea how that's going to work out. Now, not make a political point.

Obviously, we all had our own ideas on that. We all voted, and I'm sure we voted in the way we thought was right. Think of the turmoil in the Labour Party.

[11 : 15] Think of the American presidency and all that will hold for the future of the world. The growing demand again for independence in Scotland.

Do we have a God who is big enough to handle this? Can we, in my title days, making sense of history? Can we make sense of history?

How are we going to navigate away through these quicksands and shoals and reefs? Now, Isaiah's God is the God who makes sense of history.

He speaks. He sends a word. Chapter 9, verse 8. First verse we read. He sends a word. And he acts in the world. And later on in the book, in chapter 1, the God of Israel, Yahweh God of Israel, is going to summon the gods of the nations.

And he's going to ask them the questions about history. He says, Do you know what happened in the past? Not just, Can you give an account of events? Anyone can do that if they read it up.

[12 : 20] Can you make sense of it? Can you make sense of how we are now in the present? Can you foretell the future? Now, the point about Isaiah's God is he is the Lord of history, the Lord of time, and he knows what will happen because he has planned what will happen.

And that is why the key to living in this perplexing world is faith. As Isaiah has said to the godless King Ahaz back in chapter 7, if you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all because the world is perplexing.

None of us know what is going to happen. Now, very often, as we expound passages, but more often than not, say in narrative, we'll go through the sequence of events, see how the plot develops. Or in a letter, for example, see the development of the argument. This chapter, this passage we read across the chapter is a very powerful poetic passage full of vivid imagery.

And what I'm going to try to do is to disentangle two intertwining themes in this passage. Both of them are related to the word of God.

[13 : 40] Both of them are related to God's control of history. And that word, if ignored or disobeyed, will mean that the tangle of events becomes even more perplexing.

But if that word is listened to, as Peter says in his second letter, it will be a light in a dark place, in a confusing, murky, puzzling place. And the first theme I want to look at is disobedience brings judgment.

That's essentially what Wesley was saying in the hymn we sang. It's a fine hymn. It's not sung as often as some of the others, but it's a very powerful, penetrating hymn. He sends his word, chapter 9, verse 8.

In chapter 9, verse 13, the people did not inquire of the Lord. And of course, how do we inquire of the Lord? We inquire of the Lord by listening to what he has to say to us.

There's no point in saying we're trying to discover the Lord's will and then ignoring the scriptures, which is what many people do nowadays. We don't know what the Spirit is saying to us. Of course, we don't know what the Spirit is saying to us if we ignore the word that the Spirit has given.

[14:54] He tells them in 1020 to lean on the Holy One in truth. So this is about God has sent a word and God has sent us a word, a far more complete word than ancient Israel had.

After all, a great deal of the scripture has still been written when Isaiah spoke. And this word is about the relationship of disobedience and judgment.

Now, I'm sure something that must occur to us when we read the scriptures, why is there so much judgment? Particularly when you read a prophet like Isaiah, that's why, of course, we love the passages and rightly, like we read last week, the child with four names, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

I think we dislike judgment because deep down we associate it with judgmentalism, which is a very different thing.

Disapproving self-righteousness and legalism. Now, that's a very, very different thing. That's what marks the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and the scribes during Jesus' earthly life.

[16:06] What we've got to remember is this prophet is not standing denouncing and saying, you'll get what's coming to you. Remember in the great vision back in chapter 6, he had said, woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among people of unclean lips.

Those of the prophets say, I'm under judgment as well. And all of us, particularly those, as I think, who teach and preach, must remember this, that we are under judgment as well. Because we'll only ever speak of judgment without judgmentalism if we realize that.

And the other thing is, judgment always follows the rejection of God's gracious word. Like everything else, going back to the beginning of the Bible, back in Genesis 3, God graciously provided every tree in the garden.

Everything Adam and Eve could possibly need. And what does Eve do? She turns it into a bullying negative. The Lord said, you must not eat of that tree or even touch it.

Now the word touch it, of course, was simply an addition. The Lord said, I'm whatever about touching it. You see what's happening there. That instead of rejoicing in God's gracious provision, we pick out the negatives.

[17:27] I've seen a children's stock done sometimes where the speaker holds up a white sheet which has a small black mark in it and say, what do you see? Now you'll always get some smart aleck that will give the wrong answer.

The right answer, rather. But the point is, almost everybody will say, oh, I see a black mark. The whole of the white sheet is spoiled for them by the black mark.

And so often that's the case with the word of God, isn't it? We ignore the gracious provision. We ignore the fact that the Lord, as the Lord said to Moses, the Lord, gracious, slow to anger, keeping steadfast love and showing mercy to thousands who obey him.

And that is the point here. This is the God of steadfast love whose word they had rejected. And a picture of fire in verse 18 of chapter 9.

Wickedness burns like a fire. It consumes briars and thorns. It kindles the thickest of the forest. And they roll upward in a column of smoke. In other words, disobedience breeds disobedience.

[18:39] Sin breeds sin. But notice verse 18. Through the wrath of the Lord of hosts, the land is scorched. People commit sin. People reject the Lord.

And the Lord underwrites that. Very interesting in the flood story. The Lord says, Humanity has become totally corrupt.

Therefore, I will destroy it. Now in Hebrew, these words are forms of the same verb. Humanity is totally self-destructed. So I will destroy it.

In Romans 1, the terrible divine hands of God gave them over. Disobedience brings judgment. And disobedience shows itself in arrogance and self-sufficiency.

And that's the case both in Israel and in Assyria. Chapter 9, verse 9. All the people know Ephraim, the inhabitants of Samaria, who say, pride and arrogance of heart, the bricks have fallen.

[19 : 40] That may refer to the great earthquake that's mentioned by the prophet Amos. It's Amos who prophesied just a few years earlier and we are told two years before the earthquake.

What are they going to do? Oh, our house is destroyed. We'll build even more spectacular ones. But it also may be a metaphor of the world falling apart. And the blindness, where they say, they will, we don't care what God's done.

We'll just keep on building. Even if it's shoddy building. And then in 1013, the Assyrian boast, we'll come back to this, the strength of my hand.

I have done it by my wisdom. I have understanding. And I plunder their treasures. As I refer to a ray like a bull brings down those who sits on their throne. Once again, it's back to Genesis 3, isn't it?

You will be like God. That is the human pride and arrogance. It's shown, of course, in the builders of the Tower of Babel. Let us build a tower whose top will reach to heaven.

[20 : 46] Let us make a name for ourselves. The self-confidence that will not trust in the Lord, will not obey his word. Very near the end of the book, the Lord is to say to Isaiah, this is the one to whom I will look, to the one who is humble and who trembles at my word.

I don't think we tremble enough at the word of the Lord. On my bookshelf, in my study, I have a book which is called Trembling on the Threshold of the Word of God.

Every time I preach or share the word of God, I remember that. Trembling on the Threshold. This is something that is terrifying. Arrogance sought bad leadership.

Verses 9 to chapter 9 again, verse 13. This is what you get when you get leaders who do not tremble at the word of God. The people did not turn to him who struck them, nor inquire for the Lord of hosts.

The Lord cut off from Israel head and tail, palm branch and reed in one day. In particular, chapter 10, verse 15.

[22 : 02] The prophet who teaches lies. Very interesting, very often in Scripture, prophet is a term of condemnation and abuse.

In Jeremiah, for example, the word prophet occurs 200 times, over 200 times. Almost always, it's a false prophet. Because these prophets, like the super apostles whom Paul confronted in the church in Corinth, were leading astray and they were modeling arrogance and bullying.

They were not servant leaders. They were arrogant. They were malicious. and they identified their own opinions with God's word.

The Lord told me to say this. That kind of thing. How difficult when people say that, isn't it? What are you supposed to say? I believe what the Lord told us to do is this.

Like those guys who get up to preach and say, I never prepare. I just get up and say what the Lord tells me to say. My experience for such people is the Lord never tells them when to stop.

[23 : 16] We need to remember. I mean, I often think of the words of Cromwell to some of the more bigoted Scottish leaders. I beseech you by the mercies of Christ consider that you may be mistaken.

It's useful for us to remember that. There's only one authoritative word. That's the word that must be spoken. So, arrogance, self-sufficiency, bad leadership, and then conflict and division.

Here we have down in verse 21, Manasseh devours Ephraim and Ephraim devours Manasseh.

Now, these were the two main tribes in the northern kingdom. These were, and they were fighting and biting and as Paul says, as Paul warns, if you bite and devour one another, you will be consumed by one another.

And then they turn on Judah. You see the connection of this with disobeying God's word and arrogance. You see, if I disobey God's word and exalt my own opinions, then obviously I'm going to feel that I am right and everybody else is wrong.

[24 : 32] And when self is exalted, Christ is always, Christ is always dethroned.

Like at the end of 2 Corinthians, Paul and the super apostles. And Paul tells them in 2 Corinthians 13, you don't understand Christ. Your argument's not with me, but with Christ.

You don't understand the cross. You don't understand the way of servant leadership. And you don't understand the resurrection. You haven't made it already. You're still in this world.

See, we need to see this. We need to see that disobedience to God's word leads to judgment. Whether it's among God's people or in the world.

And we need to look beyond the tangle of events to the Lord of history. None of us know what's going to happen over the next years, either in our own personal lives, our lives of our own fellowship, lives of our nation, the life of the world.

[25 : 33] That is why if we do not stand firm in faith, we will not stand at all. Now that's the first theme that goes through the passage. Both God's people and the Assyrians are judged for disobedience.

But the second thing is judgment is under God's control. Once again, back to the first verse we read, the Lord has sent a word.

And when the Lord sends a word, that shows he is at work. How did God create the world? God said, let there be light. God said, and it was.

His word is active and living. Isaiah is going to develop that in the great 55th chapter, the word that comes down from heaven and works unseen unto the earth and causes transformation, personal, communal, and indeed the whole, the whole of creation.

But, there is a huge problem. Problem also identified later by Habakkuk on the brink of the exile. God's people are godless and disobedient.

[26 : 39] But why raise up an even more godless nation to punish them? Verse 5 of chapter 10, Assyria, the rod of my anger.

God is using Assyria as a club, as a rod to beat his own people. And why on earth is this happening? It's a puzzle and it's a great, and it's, it's, there's no easy answers.

But look at verse 12. When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes. In other words, it's not actually the Assyrian who is judging them, it is the Lord himself. And that is terrifying, of course.

But always throughout Scripture, particularly in these prophets who are looking to the exile and the prophets of the exile, they look beyond exile to return.

[27 : 46] When the Lord has finished his work, not when the Assyrians have finished their work, when the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion.

And notice it's still Mount Zion. Very interesting with Daniel. Daniel opens his windows to Jerusalem. Now, at that moment, Jerusalem is a smoking ruin.

As the Book of Lamentations, there are jackals prowling over it, weeds all over the place. Ezra had not, the pioneers had not yet returned. It was long before Ezra and Nehemiah would come and so on.

But, it's still God's city. And, what's this about then? First of all, the Assyrian has a wrong view of history.

Remember our subject, making sense of history. The Assyrian view of history is that might is right. That the biggest bully always wins.

[28 : 47] And, look at verse 7 of chapter 10. He does not so intend. His heart does not so think. It is in his heart to destroy and to cut off nations, not a few.

For he says, and I command as all kings, the towns mentioned here are the Assyrian towns, which have already fallen to the Assyrian advance. it's a supreme example of pride.

You see, the Assyrian kings think they are gods. Verse 10, my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols, whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and of Samaria.

I've smashed the gods of Syria, and your gods are not even as good as they are. So, I'm going to smash them as well. You're not so accomplished idolaters as the Assyrians are.

But verse 12 shows that this arrogant power is subject to a supreme power. They think they're in control, but God has his purpose.

[29 : 53] It's very like what Joseph said to his brothers, you meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. The Assyrians meant it for evil. They were bent on conquest, on world dominion, whereas God has his holy purpose to cleanse his people from sin and to restore Zion.

The Assyrians are not going to rule the world, after all. What's it said back in just a few verses before? The increase of his government, a child with four names, there will be no end on the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish and to uphold it from this time forth and forever more.

So, the Assyrians have the wrong view of history. History, the biggest bully wins, might is right. Kind of things that Hitler said to the oppressed nations during the second world war, the Reich will last for a thousand years.

When Hitler said that it had less than three years to run. That is the point. The wrong view of history is that might is right, that the bullies win, that evil triumphs.

But the remnant shows God's good purposes. Remember, this is a theme that's run through the prophet, the idea of the remnant, Emmanuel, who will come to and from the remnant.

[31 : 17] And in chapter 10, verse 21, a remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God, the mighty God, God the warrior, that's one of the names given to the child in the previous chapter.

And once again, God is going to destroy his enemies. Verse 25, lift up the staff as the Egyptians did, going back to the Exodus story and the Lord told Moses to stretch out his staff across the sea. And the story once again, which is referred to in chapter 9, the story of Gideon and God overthrowing his enemies. My people will dwell, my people who dwell in Zion.

And that's what you might call a present continuous sense, the people who dwell in Zion. Assyria will go the way of Egypt.

You see, in the ancient world, it was widely believed that a conquered nation, the gods were conquered as well. And that explains the Exodus 12, where God says, I will pass through Egypt tonight, and against all the gods of Egypt, I will carry out judgment.

[32 : 39] The great problem with the exile wars is the Lord, Yahweh, weaker than the gods of Babylon. That's the point of Daniel and Ezekiel and the other prophets of the exile.

Where is God in exile? He's in the blazing furnace and lion's den along with his people, and will bring them back. His anger is brief, but his mercy is everlasting.

Verse 25, in a very little while, my fury will come to an end. My anger will be directed to their destruction. The fury against his people, and the anger then directed at the Assyrian and later the Babylonian and the other oppressors.

But Assyria is still terrifying. We mustn't take all this to mean that we ought to be complacent, and look out of the world and shrug our shoulder and say, well, it's all going to work out.

We need to realize that we still need protection. We have a powerful picture here in verses 26 to 32 of the terrifying Assyrian invasion.

[33 : 47] This is probably not the invasion mentioned later on in the time of Hezekiah, because at that time, Sennacherib of Assyria approached Jerusalem from the south, It may well be that when the northern kingdom was conquered and Samaria fell, the Assyrians sent a raiding party down to Jerusalem.

That's perfectly possible. These names say, he has come to Iath, probably the town of I in Joshua, which was destroyed by Joshua, but later rebuilt, and only about 20 miles north of Jerusalem, Michmash, a pass where the invader might have been stopped.

Indeed, in the days of David, read in 1 Samuel 14 of how Jonathan, David's friend, defeated the Philistines in that very pass, but he's not being stopped there. Verses 29 to 31, key towns on the road to Jerusalem and Nob, just one mile north of the city, shaking the fist, literally shaking the mailed fist.

That's terrifying. And that's why the last two verses, 33 and 34, which are going to lead directly into chapter 11 that we'll look at next week, the Lord God of hosts will lock the bowels with terrifying power.

Zion will be saved, but the great trees, the Assyrian menace, will be locked down. But there is a tree that's not going to be cut down, as we'll see next week.

[35 : 22] Disobedience brings judgment, but the Lord is in charge of that judgment. Zion, the city of our God, still remains.

That's where it lies behind, we read from Psalm 46 at the beginning, probably a sound reflecting the rescue of Jerusalem. God will come to her help early in the morning.

And Psalm 40, walk about Zion, tell her palaces, that you may tell to the generation following, this God is our God. Zion stands, and that is what makes sense of history.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, in this difficult, perplexing, and confusing world, we pray that we may indeed trust in the Lord, that we may indeed stand firm in faith, that we may look beyond the terrifying power of events and circumstances, and that we may indeed trust in the one who one day

will reign over the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish and to uphold it.
And we give you our thanks for this in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.