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SCRIPTURES

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Volume 5

Isaiah - Daniel

by
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Isaiah

1. Themes from the Prologue (1:1—2:5)

The “king” of the prophets. The section of the Bible referred to as the “Latter Prophets” opens with this book by the “king” of the prophets. We do not know much about Isaiah’s life. Here and there we read a comment about the time of his prophecy. We know the names of his two sons because their names had something to do with the *content* of his prophecy. Beyond this we know little of his personal life: the accent falls completely on Isaiah’s words, his message!

The message he preached was not the fruit of reflection on his own experiences:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth;
for *the LORD* has spoken (1:2; see also Deut. 32:1).

That’s how the prophet begins, and that’s the basis of his prophetic reproach. Even when the message he brings conflicts directly with his own feelings, he goes on resolutely, for the Lord has chosen Him as His representative.

Moses and the prophets. In Isaiah's prophecies we find a connection with "Moses," with the law—just as we do in the other prophets. Some students of the Bible have dismissed the law as too firm and unyielding: the law bundles man into a tight corset and allows him no freedom of movement. The prophets, it is then argued, embody a higher morality; they are heralds of freedom, individualists who break with tradition and authoritarianism.

This contrast falsifies the position of the prophets (as well as the nature of the law). When we dealt with the law, we saw that what the prophets were doing was calling the people back to *obedience to the law*, which was Yahweh's first revelation. In a powerful way they emphasized the *threats* bound up with the covenant, threats that are echoed in "the law."

The framework of reference. Let's look now at the beginning of Isaiah's prophecies. All interpreters agree that these prophecies were intended as a *prologue* or *introduction*, which is why they were placed at the beginning. In the prologue many themes taken up again later are mentioned.

The first thing that strikes us is the reference to Sodom and Gomorrah in 1:9-10, which is an allusion to a story told in Genesis. It illustrates a truth about the prophets and about the Bible in general: the references they make are invariably to events and statements recorded elsewhere in the Bible. Scripture is its own interpreter. This point could also be expressed as follows: the primary framework of reference for such a book as Isaiah is the Bible itself.

The psalms, the prophecies, the gospels, and the epistles are not dressed up with all sorts of extra-Biblical quotations. No, the prophets stand on the shoulders of the lawgiver, while the authors of the New Testament gospels and epistles cling to "the law and the prophets."

References to Sodom occur repeatedly in the prophets

(Deut. 32:32; Is. 3:9; Ezek. 16:46). We even find one in Revelation 11:8. Sodom is used as a symbol for the fallen state of the church and also for the inescapability of the coming judgment. In Deuteronomy 29:23 we find a prophecy to the effect that abandoning the Lord's covenant leads to Sodom's judgment. Israel was infected "from the sole of the feet even to the head" (1:5-6). The apostasy was everywhere.

Echoes of Moses. What we encounter here is a covenantal indictment that echoes the song of Moses (Deut. 32), the song that testified against Israel. Compare Deuteronomy 32:1 with Isaiah 1:2. In both passages heaven and earth are called on to listen. Note also that the emphasis falls on the corruptness of the children of *Yahweh* (Deut. 32:5; Is. 1:5), who will be struck with judgment because of their apostasy, and that Sodom is mentioned in both passages for purposes of comparison.

Moreover, there is a close parallel between Isaiah 1:24 and Deuteronomy 32:41, for the former draws on the latter:

Isaiah 1:24

I will vent my wrath on my
enemies, and avenge myself
on my foes.

Deuteronomy 32:41

I will take vengeance on my
adversaries, and will requite
those who hate me.

Hypocritical sacrifices. The prologue also includes a text that could easily give rise to misunderstandings:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of he-goats (1:11).

This text could easily leave us with the impression that the Lord declares through the prophet that He does not care for sacrifices as such.

Some students of the Bible, after hearing Isaiah and other prophets speak out against the sacrifices Israel brought, conclude that the prophets were enemies of the law of Moses. But it's not quite that simple, for there is an important distinction to be made.

When Isaiah quotes the Lord as saying "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?", he is not condemning the worship services in Jerusalem. No, Isaiah, who was in the temple when he was called to serve as a prophet, has great respect for the temple. He repeatedly mentions the name *Zion* in respectful terms. In chapter 2 he prophesies that the pagans will come to the temple, the mountain of the Lord's house. "Out of *Zion* shall go forth *the law*" (2:3).

It was not Isaiah's purpose to combat "Moses." What he condemned was *misuse* of "Moses"; he was against "your" sacrifices. The Israelites were always in the court of the temple celebrating feast after feast. Yet the sacrifices they offered were hypocritical; their incense was an abomination to the Lord (1:13). Although their hands were covered with blood, they raised them to heaven (vs. 15). That would have to change, even if it meant purification through judgment.

Glimpses of light. Mixed in with all these threats we also find practical prophecies of salvation:

Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow (1:18).

Perhaps you should mark these prophecies of salvation with a colored pencil as you read through Isaiah in your

Bible. Despite the darkness of judgment we repeatedly catch glimpses of light reminiscent of Rembrandt.

Later in the first chapter we find another moving promise: Jerusalem will again be called “the city of righteousness, the faithful city” (vs. 26). In Isaiah’s sketch of the abominable unrighteousness, we read that the city of Melchizedek (whose name means *king of righteousness*) will again reflect God’s redemptive righteousness in its name.

Haven’t these promises become realities in Christ? There is a reason, of course, why such striking promises of salvation are found at the very beginning of this book of prophecy. Over the smoking ruins, Isaiah sees the coming Kingdom of peace.

All the deception of the priests has vanished. Jerusalem is no longer consumed by internal strife. The recruiting power of the church reaches its maximum, as many nations come to the mount of the temple. Swords are beaten into plowshares.

O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD (2:5).

Isaiah and Micah. You may be aware that this prophecy about the elevation of the mount of the temple appears in the very same words in Micah 4:1ff. Isaiah and Micah were contemporaries. The one was apparently acquainted with the prophecies of the other, which is not hard to understand, given the fact that Judah was not a large country.

What *is* hard to understand is why scholars make such strange comments about this parallel, arguing that the one prophet could not cite the other because the prophetic books did not yet have the status and authority of Holy Scripture. These scholars forget that Isaiah and Micah undoubtedly recognized each other as *true prophets*. They

must have been aware of each other's publications, which their disciples put together in the form of pamphlets and distributed. Perhaps the two even belonged to the same prophetic circle. Don't birds of a feather flock together?

It is sometimes argued that the king of the prophets surely would not have quoted a statement of his lesser colleague Micah, for this would lower him in public esteem. This argument, too, is to be rejected, for it ascribes to Isaiah far too much pride in his office.

Suppose the prophecy of Micah is the original one. Why wouldn't Isaiah quote his illuminating statement about the "New Jerusalem"? After all, this song about the "holy city" was not widely known, and it could well serve as part of the introduction to Isaiah's collection of prophecies of salvation and judgment. The issue was not Isaiah's prestige or honor as prophet; the real issue was the honor of the Word of the Lord. Not all the issues raised by the scholars can be discussed here, but I did feel it necessary to say something about the relation between Isaiah and Micah to show how important it is to read Scripture soberly and to avoid turning it into something it is not.

The Holy One of Israel. Before we read further in Isaiah, I would like to point out a couple of themes taken up in the prologue. First of all, the LORD is called the "Holy One of Israel" (1:4). This name is found again and again in the prophecy of Isaiah, who gained a very deep awareness of God's holiness through his calling to serve as a prophet.

God's holiness is the reason for Isaiah's wrath at Israel's unholiness and his certainty about the judgment to come. The Holy One of Israel will not tolerate covenant breaking.

The remnant. In the first chapter we also find a reference to "a few survivors," that is, a remnant. This, too, is a recurring theme in the book. Isaiah already raises it in

connection with his calling (6:13). He named one of his sons *Shear-jashub*, which means *a remnant shall return or repent* (7:3).

Isaiah's prophetic mission may have seemed a thankless task, but it was not, for there remained a remnant chosen by God in His sovereign grace. God's Word never falls the way leaves fall from a tree: there are always the seven thousand. The church will not be wiped out. Paul wrote: "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace" (Rom. 11:5). Paul, who saw the Jewish church stumble over the gospel, derived a great deal of strength from Isaiah's comforting words about the "remnant" (see Rom. 9:27ff, where he cites Is. 10:22 and 1:9; see also Deut. 30:1-10; 32:43; Rom. 15:10).

2. The Day of the Lord (2:6—5:30)

"That day." Isaiah chooses his own words and terms. The prophets were not mindless instruments in God's hand or mechanical mouthpieces repeating the message given to them. In their prophecy, their individuality came to clear expression.

In Isaiah's prophecy we find one metaphor after the other. This giant among the prophets never wearied of applying his talents in all sorts of ways. Look at 2:10-19, for example, where he talks about "the day of the LORD," which is one of the themes that comes up often in Isaiah and in other prophets as well. He speaks of a day of judgment—"that day" (2:11). Just as prophecies are not always completely fulfilled in the history of the prophet's own time, so these words about the day of the Lord will ultimately be fulfilled only on the great day of judgment after Christ's return.

A host of images. Look at the host of images succeeding each other as quickly as a flock of migrating birds alighting in a field to feed. Isaiah advises his hearers to “enter into the rock” and “hide in the dust” because of the approaching “terror of the LORD.” People will beg the mountains to fall upon them (see also Luke 23:30; Rev. 6:16). We read about the “haughty looks of man,” the “pride” of men, the cedars of Lebanon, the oaks of Bashan, hills and mountains, high towers and fortified walls, ships of Tarshish (which we would call merchantmen), and costly art treasures.

All of this reflects human pride, for man trusts in his idols. The Lord will smash them in their pride; all who exalt themselves will be brought low. Twice we hear the booming refrain: “And the LORD alone will be exalted in that day” (vs. 11, 17).

Jerusalem’s bloodstains. In dark colors, the decline of Judah’s intelligentsia is sketched. The leaders mis-lead; they confuse the people and send them down the wrong path (3:12). Therefore the Lord must judge His people.

We are given a vivid picture of the women of Jerusalem, as Isaiah tears into them for their love of finery (3:16ff). Just as false leadership leads to wretched defeat, the mundane life of these women will lead to sorrow and misery.

Following these threats is another prophecy of salvation. It is included not to temper the severity of the judgment but to give *faith* something to hang on to. Judgment will surely come, but it will not yet be the final judgment. A remnant will be left (4:3). Through that judgment, the Lord will wash Jerusalem’s bloodstains away (vs. 4).

The sun suddenly breaks through, and it almost seems that the days of deliverance in the wilderness have returned. Zion is protected by the Lord with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. A new Jerusalem rises before our eyes. This image of Zion, the city of the

church saved by Christ, was to receive new color in the Revelation to John.

The vineyard. Chapter 5 begins with the song of the vineyard that did not bring forth good fruit. Here is another theme that resounds throughout the prophets. It finally culminates in the words of Christ: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away” (John 15:1-2). Isaiah seeks to warn his people by singing a “popular” song to them:

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for justice,
but behold, bloodshed;
for righteousness,
but behold, a cry! (5:7).

There is a play on words here that does not come through in the Revised Standard Version. The Lord expected *good* government, but He got *blood* government; He expected love of the *right*, but what He found was sinful *might*.

Then follows the sixfold cry of woe (5:8ff). Judgment comes near in the form of an enemy invasion. Just as a man might whistle to summon his dog, the Lord will summon a well-organized and well-prepared army to attack Israel on “that day” just by whistling (5:26ff).

*"Whom shall I send, and who
will go for us?" Then I said,
"Here am I! Send me" (6:8).*

3. Isaiah's Calling (6:1-13)

The Lord on His throne. Isaiah's calling as a fully authorized minister of God's High Council is described. ("Who will go for us?") While he was in the temple one day in the year that godless Ahaz became king, Isaiah saw the Lord seated as King on His throne. (Ahaz was the king who proposed to trade in the service of Yahweh for eastern religions and fed his own children to the Canaanite idol Molech, whose name means *king*.)

It was as though the roof of the earthly temple had opened. Seraphim formed the bodyguard around the throne and cried out:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory (6:3).

Earthquake and smoke accompanied this manifestation of God. Isaiah cried out: "Woe is me!"

The *seventh* cry of woe was now applied to him. He was painfully aware of his own unholiness as contrasted with Yahweh's holiness. A burning coal from the altar of incense purified his lips.

Hardening hearts. Now Isaiah was both ready and willing to undertake his mission, which was a heavy assignment. His task would be to harden the hearts of the people. (Jesus Christ and Paul later had the same assignment.) Isaiah was told:

Make the heart of this people fat,
and their ears heavy,

and shut their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed (6:10; see also Matt. 13:10ff;
Acts 28:25ff).

How long was Isaiah to preach this message? Until the coming of judgment. He was not to stop before then. Still, things didn't look entirely hopeless, for there would be a *remnant* left, a stump. The Lord preserves His church, as the rest of the Bible and the church's subsequent history shows.

*Behold, I and the children whom
the LORD has given me are signs
and portents in Israel (8:18).*

4. Prophesying through Names (7:1—9:7)

The Immanuel sign. In the days of Ahaz, the Assyrians became a great power. Various countries sought protection in the face of this rising power by forming an alliance. Aram (Syria) under King Rezin and the northern kingdom of the ten tribes tried to force Judah and its king (i.e. Ahaz) to join the alliance by besieging Jerusalem.

The Lord sent Isaiah to Ahaz with a message of deliverance. The king was even allowed to ask for a sign. But King Ahaz acted indifferent to the Lord and refused. Then Isaiah prophesied about the birth of a son bearing the name *Immanuel* (i.e. God with us). He declared: "Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (7:14). This prophecy, which was intended as a sign for Ahaz, was fulfilled in

Isaiah's own time, but its ultimate fulfillment was the birth of *the* Immanuel, Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:21).

Isaiah's sons. *Immanuel* is not the only significant name given to a child in the book of Isaiah. As we saw earlier, Isaiah had a son whom he was ordered to name *Shear-jashub*—a remnant shall repent. And when his second son was born, Isaiah was told to name him *Maher-shalal-hash-baz*, which means hasten the spoil, rush on the prey.

The prophet was instructed to write the name of his second son on a large tablet as a kind of advertising billboard. Before this child became a man, both Damascus (Aram) and Samaria would be carried away by Assyria as prey (8:1-4).

Promises for the "remnant." Think back to Isaiah's call. It was clear from the outset that the *majority* would not listen. Isaiah therefore had to restrict his message to the circle of his disciples. "Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. I will wait for the LORD, who is *hiding his face* from the house of Jacob" (8:16-17).

The politicized people and their leaders, who turned to mediums and wizards in their fear, would stumble over the Lord (vs. 12ff, 19). Isaiah would only let the "remnant" hear the promises of salvation. "To the teaching and to the testimony! Surely for this word which they speak there is no dawn" (vs. 20). Yet the *light* continues to shine for some:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder (9:6).

The Messiah was coming closer. One day there would again be peace on the throne of David.

5. Israel's Remnant and the Shoot from Jesse's Stump (9:8—12:6)

The northern kingdom. In 9:8—10:4 we read prophecies directed against Ephraim, i.e. the northern kingdom, which was hostile to Judah. Notice how the refrain already heard in 5:25 is repeated four times: “Yet his anger is not spent, still his hand is raised to strike” (9:11, 16, 20; 10:4 JB).

Despite the Lord's punishing hand, Ephraim did not repent. Therefore it fell prey to Assyria's soldiers. But Assyrian imperialism was only a rod in the hand of the Lord (10:5). Consequently, once proud Assyria carried out its assignment, it would also fall prey to judgment.

The southern kingdom. The Lord permits the small kingdom of Judah to face great dangers as well. In 10:27ff we read a report from the front. If you open your Bible atlas to a map of the area, you can see how Jerusalem's position became more and more perilous: Aiath, Migron, Michmash, Geba, Ramah. The movement is toward the mountain of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem.

But Yahweh intervenes and the enemy forces withdraw. The tribes of tall men, like cedars of Lebanon, are cut down. The ax is laid to the root of the tree, which then comes crashing down (10:33-4).

Deliverance for creation. Read a little further. Using the same metaphor, Isaiah announces that a shoot will come forth from the old stump of Jesse, i.e. the house of David. The sevenfold Spirit of the Lord will rest upon Him, for He is the Messiah, the one anointed with the Spirit. This Messiah will bring *shalom* (peace).

In images drawn from the new dispensation, the Messianic state of salvation is sketched:

Then the wolf shall live with the sheep,
and the leopard lie down with the kid;
the calf and the young lion shall grow up together,
and a little child shall lead them;
the cow and the bear shall be friends,
and their young shall lie down together.
The lion shall eat straw like cattle;
the infant shall play over the hole of the cobra,
and the young child dance over the viper's nest
(11:6-8 NEB).

Of course we should not take this to mean that the lion ate straw in paradise like an ox, or that there will be animals "in heaven." All this prophecy tells us is that the groaning creation will be delivered. The images speak to us of the peace to come: "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain" (vs. 9).

The wells of salvation. Then come still more images drawn from the time of Isaiah. The exiles (from both Judah and Ephraim) return from foreign lands. These two brother nations that so often harassed each other will no longer be jealous of each other but will cooperate instead. The *new exodus* will call for a life of gratitude. Listen to its hymn:

I will give thanks to thee, O LORD,
for though thou wast angry with me,
thy anger turned away,
and thou didst comfort me (12:1).

This prophetic section of the book of Isaiah closes with a psalm. Israel later used this psalm at the Feast of Tabernacles: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (vs. 3). On each day of the feast, a priest equipped with a golden pitcher would draw water from the pool of Siloam and pour it into silver basins at the west side of

the altar. As the priest was pouring, the people would repeat Isaiah's words (i.e. 12:3).

On the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Christ once declared: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37). Christ, the root of David (Rev. 5:5; 22:16), the Lion of Judah and Lamb of God, fulfills all the promises. Through Him we have *peace*.

6. Prophecies about Jerusalem and the Nations (13:1—23:18)

The Lord's imperial power. In the early chapters of Isaiah, it is made clear that Yahweh rules the nations. Then comes a section in which the nations are dealt with one by one. We read prophecies about the states bordering on Israel (Moab, Philistia, Damascus) as well as prophecies about the great powers (Babylon, Assyria, Egypt). There is also a prophecy about Jerusalem, in which we read: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (22:13; see also I Cor. 15:32).

Were these prophecies preached in foreign cities, just as Jonah once preached in Nineveh? We have no reason to assume that they were. But they were definitely proclaimed, and that's the important thing. Through the mouth of Isaiah, the Lord made known His imperial power. Didn't Isaiah see Him seated in Zion's temple as King?

Babylon. The prophecies about the nations begin with a divine statement about the nation used in Scripture as a symbol of concentrated worldly power—Babylon. In the face of the rise of Assyria as a ravenous militaristic power, there were some in Judah who looked expectantly to

Babylon. Wouldn't there be deliverance from Babylon's side?

When Babylonian emissaries visited Hezekiah to compliment him after his healing, they were very warmly received. Then came the prophet with his burning words: Judah need not rely on any alliance with Babylon, for the day of the Lord was coming relentlessly, with wrath and searing anger, making a desolate wilderness of the earth. The Medes will disfigure Babylon, the most glorious of kingdoms (13:17). The judgment of Babylon will even help bring about the restoration of "Israel." Israel will again dwell in its own land, free of hard slave labor. Yes, Israel will triumphantly mock the king of Babylon in song (14:3ff).

Isaiah then gives us the text of this mocking song, which takes the form of a funeral lament. Babylon's king is on his way to the realm of the dead. There his former colleagues taunt him; they mock him in song:

How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, Son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
You said in your heart,
"I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far north" (14:12-13).

This "mount of assembly" seems to be borrowed from Eastern mythology, which spoke of a mountain in the north (Phoenicia) where the gods met regularly and cast lots to determine the events of the coming year. (Think of Olympus, the mount of the Greek gods.)

What Isaiah presents here are ghosts in the realm of the dead speaking their own heathen language (see also Ezek.

28:14, where this Eastern idolatrous thought-world is likewise the background). The inhabitants of this realm laugh at Babylon's monarch for deifying himself. Ancient exegesis regarded the fall of the "Day Star" or morning star (Latin translation: *Lucifer*) as a "type" of the fall of satan.

Assyria and the Philistines. We read prophecies against Assyria in 14:24ff and against the Philistines in vs. 28ff. It appears that the Philistines sent emissaries to Jerusalem with an invitation to join an anti-Assyrian alliance. This may have happened when the Assyrian tyrant Tiglath-pileser died.

Isaiah now prophesies that an adder will come forth from the serpent's root. In other words, the suffering will be incalculable. From the north, the side where danger often appears on the horizon, will come smoke, and "there is no straggler in his ranks" (14:31). Judah must not join any alliances.

What answer should the Philistine emissaries be given? "*The LORD* has founded Zion, and in her the afflicted of his people find refuge" (vs. 32). This prophecy was borne out. All the nations were overrun by Assyria, including Philistia, which had rebelled. But during Hezekiah's time, the Lord protected Jerusalem.

Moab. In chapters 15 and 16 we read a prophecy about Moab. This prophecy includes a text that drew a lot of attention in the Netherlands during the second world war: "Hide the outcasts, betray not the fugitive" (16:3). This text, which hung on many a wall, was then applied to those who went "underground" to flee arrest by Nazi occupation forces.

Now, the people in the Netherlands did the right thing when they hid fugitives from the Nazis, but when they used this text from Isaiah as their justification, they were taking it out of context. The text talks about Moab, which was

being judged and punished. An appeal was made to Judah to offer shelter to the victims of the war. The text could better be regarded as a *mission* text, a *Pentecost* message: the “church” offers asylum to the ravaged “world.” Isaiah was inviting the Moabites to send their lambs—they had many sheep—to “the mount of the daughter of Zion” (16:1).

A dark picture. After this comes prophecy after prophecy, as the various nations get their turn: Damascus and Ephraim (who had together harassed Judah), Ethiopia, Egypt (to whom many in Judah still looked for help against the might of the Assyrians), Babylon once more, Edom, Arabia, politicized Jerusalem, and finally the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. These prophecies are not uniform; each reflects something of the color and character of the land it deals with. Just as lambs and vines are spoken of in connection with Moab, the prophecy about Egypt mentions the Nile, fishermen, and the wise men at the court. In the prophecy against Tyre and Sidon, we hear about booming trade and ships that go to sea.

“Watchman, what of the night?” The prophetic answer to this pressing question is: “Morning comes, and also the night” (21:11, 12). Thus Isaiah paints a dark picture of the future. Yet, here and there we see a ray of light. We see how Zion gives refuge to Moab. In 19:18ff some beautiful statements are made in connection with Egypt and Assyria: Egypt, the ancient enemy, will serve the Lord, and so will Assyria. Thus the promise made to Abraham long ago was being fulfilled: Israel would be a *blessing* to the nations.

The power of the key. Isaiah 22 deals with Jerusalem. Not only is judgment pronounced on this proud city, it is also proclaimed that Shebna, the steward in Hezekiah’s court, is to be demoted and replaced by Eliakim. Shebna’s uniform will be given to Eliakim, who is to be entrusted

with “the key of the house of David.” This means: “He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open” (vs. 22).

Shebna, the king’s trusted official, had exerted an evil influence and favored alliances with foreign nations. He had not exercised the responsibilities of his office properly. The power of the key is not to be used arbitrarily!

When we think of this power of the key, we are reminded immediately of what Christ said to Peter: “I will give you the *keys* of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 16:19). Christ is “the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens” (Rev. 3:7). Through the offices, Christ allows His church to serve as steward. Isn’t this an awesome policy for a world writhing in pain?

This chapter also preaches Christ as the perfect office-bearer in that it prophesies that Eliakim will also fall because of favoritism shown to his own family:

And they will hang on him the whole weight of his father’s house, the offspring and issue, every small vessel, from the cups to all the flagons. In that day, says the LORD of hosts, the peg that was fastened in a sure place will give way; and it will be cut down and fall, and the burden that was upon it will be cut off, for the LORD has spoken (22:24-5).

7. Isaiah’s Apocalypse (24:1—27:13)

Judgment on the land. When we turn to chapters 24-27, the geographic limits in the prophecies dealt with earlier seem to fall away. Some Bible translations give this section some such heading as: “The LORD’s judgment on the earth.” Although this prophecy does bear somewhat on

the last judgment, the word *earth* in such a heading should really be replaced by *land*.

Again the judgment is set out in a colorful way. Central to the vision and the songs is not the wicked world but the covenant-breaking church. The land of *Israel* is meant. The “inhabitants” (24:5, 6, 17) are the Israelites, and “this mountain” (25:6, 7, 10) is Mount Zion. Within the land of Judah, the fortified city is Jerusalem.

The everlasting covenant. First it is shown how the Lord used an enemy attack to punish the inhabitants of the land because of their transgression of the everlasting covenant (24:5). This “everlasting covenant” is not the covenant with Noah but the covenant with Abraham and his seed. The land appears to return to the void and formless condition mentioned in Genesis 1. Wealth and position do not save anyone from judgment.

The inhabitants of the land have violated the everlasting covenant with God. The result is “terror, and the pit, and the snare” (24:17). In the Hebrew text these three words begin with the same letter, which the German Zurich Bible reflects nicely in its translation: “Grauen und Grube und Garn.” We have a grim play on words here. It’s almost as though the world faces another flood, as cosmic catastrophes rear their ugly heads.

Salvation for the Gentiles. At a certain point the tide turns. The “kings of the earth” and the “host of heaven, in heaven” (probably fallen angels) will be imprisoned and punished (see also Rev. 20:3). Zion will stand *unshakable* above the *shaken universe*. Yahweh and His elders—think of the elders in Revelation 4—will dwell in Zion. This is the occasion for another psalm. Yahweh is a place of refuge for the weak and needy (25:1-5).

For the peoples, the Gentiles, there is salvation; a meal, a “Lord’s supper” is prepared for them. The dividing wall

is broken down, and the veil covering their faces is destroyed on “this mountain,” i.e. the mount of the temple. Men see the glory of the Lord, death is overcome, and all tears are washed away (see also Rev. 7:17; 21:4). Once more we hear the refrain: “We have a strong city; he sets up salvation as walls and bulwarks” (26:1). Moreover, the dead will be made alive again, and their bodies will rise from the grave (vs. 19).

“In the path of thy judgments, O LORD, we wait for thee” (vs. 8). God’s people wait within their chambers until the fury of His covenant judgment is past (vs. 20). The “remnant” is saved. The Lord will avenge the blood of His servants. No longer will the earth hide the bloodstains of the slain.*

The first resurrection. We read that the fleeing serpent, the twisting serpent, and the dragon in the sea will be slain. (Think of Assyria, Babylon and Egypt, and also of the dragon and his two henchmen in Revelation 12 and 13.) Yet Israel will be restored as a vineyard (see ch. 5),

*Isaiah 26 was sometimes sung in the synagogue and the early Christian church as a hymn! Verse 21 reminds us of Deuteronomy 32:43, which is also part of a hymn. There are other similarities between these two chapters as well. This by itself makes it unlikely that Isaiah 24-27 deals with the world in general rather than God’s judgment on His rebellious covenant people (the subject of Deuteronomy 32).

In the knowledge that God avenges the blood of His servants lies a great comfort—not only when we consider the blood of the martyrs long ago but also when we think of more recent persecution and oppression. Personal desire for vengeance should not play a role here. Article 37 of the Belgic Confession says of the believers who have been wronged: “Their cause which is now condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious will then be known to be the cause of the Son of God.”

blossoming and bearing fruit (see John 15). All the earlier idolatry will be forgotten (27:9).

The “great trumpet” will call back the exiles scattered from Egypt to the Euphrates. In a world of shattered kingdoms, Israel’s sons will march to the palace of their king, to the holy mountain at Jerusalem. The “remnant” can continue to sing psalms, for there will be a *new* and *righteous* Jerusalem. “Thy dead shall live” (26:19). The church believes in the first resurrection.

8. Yahweh Rules as King from Zion (28:1—35:10)

A tiresome schoolmaster. Yahweh’s kingship at Zion is also dealt with in the section that begins with chapter 28. After an old prophecy about Samaria (vs. 1-6), attention is focused on *Jerusalem*. Like Samaria, Jerusalem will be subjected to judgment. The holy city suffers from poor leadership: both prophet and priest “reel with strong drink.”

Isaiah is regarded as a tiresome schoolmaster. Note that in verses 9 and 10, he quotes what people were saying about him; that’s why the Revised Standard Version encloses these verses within quotation marks:

“Whom will he teach knowledge,
and to whom will he explain the message?
Those who are weaned from the milk,
those taken from the breast?
For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
line upon line, line upon line,
here a little, there a little.”

Did that great dreamer suppose the people would subject themselves to his schoolmaster’s discipline? Not a chance!

The words used here in the Hebrew give us the impression of a drunk rambling on: “Sav lasav, sav lasav, kav lakav, kav lakav.”

A political back door? The reason for all the foolish talk in Zion was that there was still a political back door: *Egypt* would support Zion against the ravenous wolf Assyria. Yet the prevailing policy also called for appeasement of Assyria, the advancing scourge. If Assyria drew near, things wouldn’t be all that bad, the prophets and priests assured others and themselves.

Isaiah insisted, to the contrary, that it would be a calamity. The treaty made with the realm of the dead (Sheol) was wiped out and not ratified by God. The people would be threshed. Only those who *believed* would find rest. In Zion the Lord will lay a precious and tested cornerstone as foundation (vs. 16).

A foundation in Zion. Here we have the emphasis on *Zion* again (see 2:2ff; 6:1ff; 8:14; 14:32). Ahaz may make his plans and the politicians in Jerusalem under Hezekiah may make theirs, but the Lord, ruling from His temple in Zion, sees to it that *His* plans go through. Even if the earthly temple should fall, the “Jerusalem project” will be realized.

A foundation is being laid in Zion: “He who believes will not be in haste” (28:16). This text should not be taken to mean that believers should never be in a hurry. The Septuagint version of the Old Testament renders this text as follows: “He who believes will *not be put to shame.*” When this verse is quoted in the New Testament, the Septuagint version is followed (see Rom. 9:33; 10:11; I Pet. 2:6).

One could go on and say that this text is clarified in the New Testament. In Christ, the cornerstone at Jerusalem is laid. He Himself is the precious stone (*petra*), the foun-

dation of the church. The church was built on Him, although He is a stumbling block to those who do *not* believe (see Matt. 16:18; 21:42; Luke 2:34; Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20; I Pet. 2:6ff; Rev. 21:14; I Cor. 3:10-11).

When you read the book of Acts and the Gospel according to Luke, bear in mind that they describe how Christ, beginning at Jerusalem, revealed Himself as the *cornerstone* through His fall and resurrection. The “Jerusalem project” is fulfilled in Him.

Proof of full salvation. Yahweh rules from His temple at Zion. But if the leaders are among the spiritually blind, He will call the peoples to arms against “Ariel,” the place of the hearth and the altar, the city and temple of David (ch. 29). The people should trust in the Holy One of Israel, who wants to be gracious to His people (30:18). They should not rely on Egypt, on horses and chariots (ch. 30-31). How could Egypt, the land from which Israel was delivered on the night of the Passover and the amazing passage through the Red Sea, now become Israel’s deliverer? The Lord would see to it that both the helper (Egypt) and the one helped (Jerusalem) stumbled and fell.

The people must learn to live by the Lord’s promises. He will bring new deliverance, as on the night of the Passover (30:27ff). Assyria will be defeated. Messianic perspectives open up: a king will rule in righteousness. There had been many infatuations (29:9ff), but now the blind would see things for what they were (32:3; 35:5).

Above the need and misery, Jerusalem stands out:

Look upon Zion, the city of our appointed feasts!
Your eyes will see Jerusalem,
a quiet habitation, an immovable tent,
whose stakes will never be plucked up,
nor will any of its cords be broken (33:20).

Jerusalem will *blossom*, even after the judgments. Yet Edom will be destroyed once and for all by the coming judgment (ch. 34). *God's D-day* is coming:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing (35:1-2).

Judah's exiles will return one day.

When Christ appeared, He fulfilled this final song in this section of Isaiah. As *proof* that He brought full salvation for those whom the Lord has redeemed, He made the deaf hear and the blind see (35:5; see also Matt. 11:5). "Then shall the lame man leap like a hart" (35:6; see also Acts 3:8).

*The LORD of hosts is with us; the
God of Jacob is our refuge
(Ps. 46:11).*

9. Isaiah and Hezekiah (36:1—39:8)

Sennacherib's invasion. After these prophecies came the proof of what Isaiah was talking about—Sennacherib's attack and the wondrous deliverance. In passing we see that Shebna has been demoted to scribe, and that Eliakim is now "over the household" in his place (37:2; see also 22:15ff). Shebna had apparently advocated a policy of seeking strength through a nationalistic dependence on alliances rather than through trust in the Lord. His demotion signaled a change of course on Hezekiah's part.

On one of his war monuments, Sennacherib recorded

for all posterity the following words about his invasion of Judah:

As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke. I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered (them) by means of well-stamped (earth-) ramps, and battering rams brought (thus) near (to the walls) (combined with) the attack by foot soldiers, (using) mines, breeches as well as sapper work. I drove out (of them) 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small cattle beyond counting, and considered (them) booty. Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthwork in order to molest those who were leaving his city's gate. His towns which I had plundered, I took away from his country and gave them (over) to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Sillibel, king of Gaza. Thus I reduced his country, but I still increased the tribute and the *katrû*-presents (due) to me (as his) overlord which I imposed (later) upon him beyond the former tribute, to be delivered annually.*

Sennacherib went further in his boastful language, relating what glorious treasures of ivory and gold and so forth Hezekiah let him take back to Nineveh. Yet he did not claim to have *captured* Jerusalem—which is significant. Much of Hezekiah's territory was conquered, and he himself was trapped in Jerusalem. But Assyria's battering rams did not rip open Jerusalem's walls. Scripture tells us why not.

*Quoted from "The Annals of Sennacherib," trans. D. D. Luckenbill, in James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, third edition (Princeton, 1969), p. 288.

The king's amen. It was the Word of the Lord coming to Hezekiah by way of Isaiah that persuaded him not to listen to the Goliath-like challenge of the Assyrian marshal (37:6-7). Note that Hezekiah went into the *temple*, where Yahweh, the God of Israel, was seated on His throne between the cherubs (37:1, 14-20). The king was thereby echoing his amen to the theme constantly preached by Isaiah: from His temple Yahweh will reveal Himself as King over His people and over the whole world.

Those who are acquainted with Isaiah's other prophecies will recognize some familiar sounds in the answer to Hezekiah's prayer:

Whom have you [O king of Assyria] mocked and reviled?
Against whom have you raised your voice
and haughtily lifted your eyes?
Against the *Holy One of Israel!*
Because you have raged against me
and your arrogance has come to my ears,
I will put my hook in your nose
and my bit in your mouth,
and I will turn you back on the way
by which you came (37:23, 29).

When the Assyrian imperialists captured a monarch, they would sometimes treat him like a pig or a horse—by putting a hook in his nose or a bit in his mouth. Here the Lord speaks of doing the same thing to Assyria's ruler. Isn't He the Holy One of Israel?

The theme of the "remnant" is sounded here, just as in the days of Ahaz: "For out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this" (37:32). Do you now see the beautiful unity in Isaiah's prophecy?

Notice that there was nothing left of Sennacherib's boasting in the end: "By the way that he came, by the same

he shall return” (vs. 34). The angel of Yahweh passed through Sennacherib’s camp and killed thousands of his soldiers (vs. 36-7). Sennacherib himself was later murdered in a temple devoted to an idol (vs. 38).

Hezekiah’s song of praise. Isaiah 38 tells us about Hezekiah’s sickness and subsequent healing through the mediation of Isaiah. Then follows a song that Hezekiah sang after his recovery. No doubt this son of David wanted his psalm to be used in the temple. Beza has produced a rhymed version for use in the churches. It’s a shame that the people who are so eager to sing hymns in church have so little interest in the Biblical songs that appear *outside* the book of Psalms, for these songs are genuinely edifying.

Read through Hezekiah’s song of praise carefully. The fragility of life comes out clearly. But this song also deals with redemption—the redemption that consists first of all of forgiveness. “Thou by thy love hast brought me back from the pit of destruction; for thou hast cast all my sins behind thee” (38:17 NEB). Now Hezekiah can affirm life again—in the service of the Lord, living a life full of salvation! “The living, the living, he thanks thee, as I do this day” (vs. 19). In this repetition we hear Hezekiah’s cry of joy.

Babylonian emissaries. The story related in Isaiah 39 contrasts sharply with this hymn of deliverance. Hezekiah basks in the words of the Babylonian emissaries who came to congratulate him on his recovery. The rising Babylonian state would presumably be a good ally against Assyria. Therefore Hezekiah makes it clear to the emissaries that Judah is not a state to take lightly either.

At this point Isaiah intervenes. Earlier he had declared that the danger from Rezin of Syria and Pekah of the northern kingdom of Israel was not as great as the danger from the *Assyrian* side. Now he points to a new enemy,

which would eventually supplant Assyria. *Babylon*, which had sent emissaries to wish Hezekiah well, would one day send an army to subject Jerusalem.

Later, when the Jews were plunged into the misery of life in exile, they could think back to Isaiah's warning: the prophet had warned that the catastrophe was coming closer and closer. Yet, Isaiah had also spoken of a remnant and of a stone at Zion. The name *Isaiah* means "The LORD is salvation."

10. The God of Genesis and the New Exodus (40:1—48:22)

The question of authorship. Isaiah 40-66 is often referred to in the scholarly world as "Deutero-Isaiah" (i.e. Isaiah II), for there are many who believe that these chapters were written by someone else who lived some 150 years after the time of Isaiah. There are even some scholars who assign chapters 56-66 to a "Trito-Isaiah" (i.e. Isaiah III). I do not propose to go into this question here, for my real concern is the *content* of the prophecy recorded in the book of Isaiah. Yet it must be admitted that the later chapters of Isaiah do presuppose the destruction of Jerusalem and a Babylonian exile that had already lasted some years.

These chapters make us think of a debate between the prophet and the despondent exiles. Time and again he quotes their complaints and reproaches directed at Yahweh. Then he appeals to the promises made to the patriarchs and prophecies about the coming of *salvation*.

If these prophecies do come from some prophet other than Isaiah, he must have been thoroughly steeped in the "spirit" of his great predecessor. Throughout the entire book of Isaiah, we find the same sort of language, e.g. references to the Lord as "the Holy One of Israel."

A refrain. It is striking that a certain refrain occurs twice in the later chapters. The Lord is quoted as saying: "There is no peace for the wicked" (48:22 and 57:21). The placement of this refrain argues against the hypothesis that chapters 56-66 were written by a separate author.

At the end of the book, we find the sketch of the worm that does not die and the fire that is not extinguished. The meaning of this passage corresponds closely to that of the refrain mentioned above. This suggests the following division of the last part of Isaiah: (1) chapters 40-48, (2) chapters 49-57, and (3) chapters 58-66. In all three sections we hear the same comforting language. The miserable situation of the desolate city of Jerusalem forms the background.

Let's now read through the second half of the book of Isaiah, which is a book of great comfort. Today's church will find words of exceptional encouragement there.

A feeling of hopelessness. Doesn't the church find itself in difficulty, in water up to its neck? What about the promises of God? What can the church hang on to in this possessed world? The church knows well what the feeling of hopelessness is. Just as the Jews in exile were separated from salvation by many sins, so our guilt builds a wall between the Lord and us. Without *grace*, we will not reach the New Jerusalem either.

This amazing grace is what the second part of the book of Isaiah deals with:

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins (40:1-2).

“Jerusalem” is addressed here, that is, those who have been led into exile from David’s city. It is their guilt that has been paid for, atoned for. Through their own achievements? Who is the Redeemer atoning for Israel’s sins? “I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (43:25). Soon we will encounter the figure of the *suffering Servant of the Lord*, who was pierced for the iniquities of many and offered Himself as a sacrifice (52:13—53:12), the One anointed with the Spirit (42:1; 61:1; see also Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Luke 4:18).

The prophet’s calling. What we are actually reading about here is the calling of the prophet. He may comfort his people, but he must also prepare the way for the Lord, who comes to redeem His people—a theme that was repeated later when John the Baptist appeared on the scene before the public ministry of the Christ began.

The prophetic power may not be broken by a *defeatist attitude*. “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever” (40:8; see also I Pet. 1:23ff). Therefore exiled Jerusalem can itself become a messenger bearing glad tidings. Yahweh will be a Good Shepherd for His people (40:11; see also 49:10; Rev. 7:17).

The Creator. In exile Judah apparently came under the spell of Babylon’s gods. Hadn’t Yahweh suffered a defeat when His people went into exile? In a pastoral fashion, the prophet takes up these questions repeatedly, emphasizing two points.

First of all, Yahweh is the Creator. To Him the nations are like drops of water in a bucket, like specks of dust on a scale. He “stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in” (40:22). It is as though we were reading the final chapters of the book of

Job again. Lift up your eyes and look. Who do you suppose made it all?

The prophet argues that the One who assigns the clouds, the wind and the storm their place in the scheme of things surely has a place in mind for the church. The God of the church is the God who controls the world, that is, the *God of Genesis*.

The covenant God. Secondly, Yahweh is the faithful covenant God who revealed Himself in Israel's history:

But you, Israel, my servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
fear not, for I am with you,
be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand
(41:8, 10).

The Lord is also the *God of Exodus*, the God of the great trek out of Egypt and the wonderful provision in the wilderness. Is His arm any shorter now?

I will open rivers on the bare heights,
and fountains in the midst of the valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
and the dry land springs of water (vs. 18).

On the other hand, the rivers will dry up for the pilgrims going to Jerusalem, just as in the old days (51:10; 44:7). Whereas the Israelites left Egypt in haste, they will depart calmly from Babylon, that foreign land:

For you shall not go out in haste,
and you shall not go in flight,

for the LORD will go before you,
and the God of Israel will be your rear guard (52:12).

Keep these two leading thoughts in mind as you read this impressive prophecy. The Creator is the *Redeemer* of His people. As Redeemer, He uses *means* to carry out His purposes. He uses King Cyrus to conquer Babylon with his army of Medes and Persians. This gives the Jews the opportunity to return to their own land and rebuild the temple (41:25ff; 44:28—45:7).

Yahweh's lawsuit. The gods of the pagans are a “delusion”; they are “empty wind” (41:29). The prophet speaks repeatedly in terms of a lawsuit between Yahweh and the gods of the nations.

Set forth your case, says the LORD;
bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob (41:21).

Let them bring their witnesses to justify them,
and let them hear and say, It is true (43:9).

But the representatives of the gods can point to no great deeds accomplished by the mute images they worship. Therefore the Lord looks for other witnesses.

When Christ told His disciples just before His ascension into heaven that they would be His witnesses, He was echoing the words of Isaiah (43:10; 44:8). Israel will see *who* its God is. Repeatedly God reveals Himself by speaking in the first person:

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
“I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god” (44:6).

Once again we see that a famous New Testament text is

not “something new.” When we hear the declaration in the book of Revelation about the first and the last, the alpha and the omega, as applied to God the Father and the Son, we recognize it as an echo of the book of Isaiah. This is not to deny, of course, that in Revelation this text receives a further explication and application.

Comforting words. If you read carefully, you will be struck by how often the book of Isaiah is quoted in the New Testament. From the Dead Sea Scrolls found in a cave in the neighborhood of the Red Sea in 1947, we learn that Isaiah was one of the most loved and often read parts of Scripture. (Deuteronomy and Psalms were apparently also very popular.) This should not surprise us. Wasn’t it in the book of Isaiah that the Lord spoke comforting words to His people about redeeming them from their sins and buying them back?

“Fear not, be not afraid.” We hear the same language at the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist and throughout the entire New Testament. “Have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any” (44:8). Here we cannot help but think of the name Moses gave his famous song in Deuteronomy 32.

11. The Servant of the Lord

No reliance on grace. It may well be that the Jews in exile made false appeals to the covenant between the Lord and their fathers. Hadn’t their fathers served the Lord? What about all those offerings and the services in the temple?

The Lord rejects this reliance on works (43:22—44:5).

Jacob/Israel had sinned against Yahweh. The exile was justified. Because of all the transgressions, Yahweh subjected Jacob/Israel to exile and abuse. Only His free grace saves and gives new life. For the sake of His old covenant promises to His “servant” Israel, the Lord uses Cyrus, His “anointed.”

The potter. Babylon’s gods sink away into nothingness. They are so impotent that they must be carried around in processions, while Yahweh, Israel’s powerful God, has always carried His people (46:1-4). All of world history revolves around the servant of the Lord—not because of any nobility on Israel’s part but because of the Lord’s *sovereign freedom*, which came to expression in the covenant promises made to the patriarchs.

That’s why it is emphasized so strongly that Cyrus does not set Israel free because of any price or reward (45:13). The Lord is the sovereign potter (45:9-13; see also Rom. 9:20-1). He revealed Himself as such in creation (Gen. 2:7). And when He used His “shepherd,” Cyrus, to bring deliverance, He also acted as the one who shaped and fashioned Israel.

Israel could not bring about its own deliverance. That’s why the Lord used a heathen as His “deacon,” His servant (Rom. 13:4). There was no room for Israel, the servant of the Lord, to boast about its own achievements.

Cyrus. Note that Cyrus is referred to in thematic fashion after Isaiah 40, which serves as an introductory passage (41:1ff). Cyrus will go about his work of deliverance on behalf of Israel, the servant of the Lord. But in 42:1-7, thematic attention is focused on another Servant of the Lord.

At first nothing more is said about this other Servant. In 42:8—48:22, everything revolves around Israel and its deliverance through Cyrus, God’s “anointed,” who is to capture Babylon (44:21—47:15).

In 49:1-7, the other Servant of the Lord is brought to the fore again and is called a light to the nations, just as in 42:6. In succeeding chapters He is discussed twice more (50:4-11 and 52:13—53:12). Isaiah 49-57 is dominated by this figure.

A lamb led to the slaughter. Who is this Servant of the Lord? Many suggestions have been offered—Moses, Uzziah, Jeremiah, Jehoiachin, the prophet himself.

From the New Testament it is clear that this Servant of the Lord is no one other than Jesus Christ in His humiliation and exaltation. He is the one who took the guilt of His people upon Himself vicariously. He is the one who was led as a lamb to the slaughter (53:7; see also Jer. 11:19). In Him all the suffering of the prophets and the righteous is summed up.

The Servant of the Lord is the one who is exalted by following the path of suffering (52:13). In His exaltation He takes with Him the “many” for whom He suffered. That’s why we find so many redemptive promises for Israel in the passages that come after the prophecies about the Servant of the Lord.

Promises for the nations. Those redemptive promises are meant not just for Israel but for the nations. In Isaiah 58-66, we have a further elaboration of this salvation, with Jerusalem clearly at the center of things. The nations go to Jerusalem, the city of light (ch. 60).

It should not surprise us that there are echoes of this widely read book of prophecy all throughout the New Testament. Think of how Christ was characterized as the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36; Rev. 5:6). When Philip gave instruction to the Ethiopian, the subject was Isaiah 53 (Acts 8:30-5). Think also of Luke 22:37, Romans 4:25; 10:16; and 15:21. I’m sure you can find many more such connections on your own.

A light for the Gentiles. It is noteworthy that the New Testament also applies the statements about the Servant of the Lord to the preaching engaged in by the church. The Servant of the Lord is a light to the nations, but He uses His preachers to bring the light.

The Servant of the Lord came to open the eyes of the blind. That's why it was fitting that Paul was blinded when he was first called, only to have his eyes opened later. He was being called to be an instrument in Christ's hand and to open the eyes of others in turn.

The Lord Jesus said to Paul: "I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light" (Acts 26:17-18 NIV). And in Antioch, a city in Asia Minor (i.e. in the "coastlands"), Paul and Barnabas appealed to a prophecy about the Servant of the Lord as their reason for preaching to the Gentiles once they met with hostility at the synagogue. "For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth!'" (Acts 13:47). This statement echoes Isaiah 42:6 and reminds us especially of the second of the songs about the Servant of the Lord:

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a *light for the Gentiles*,
that you may bring my salvation to the *ends of*
the earth (49:6 NIV).

No lie in their mouth. We must be wary of any one-sided application of the "servant" prophecies to Christ. He and His people are *one*. Therefore Paul can cite the third song about the servant of Yahweh in his song of victory: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God

who justifies; who is to condemn?” (Rom. 8:33-4; see also Is. 50:8-9).

When the fourth “song” declares that there is no deceit in the mouth of the Lord’s servant, we apply these words to Christ (53:9; see also I Pet. 2:22). Peter declares that we must walk in His footsteps and be conformed to His image. That’s why it is said of the 144,000 who follow the Lamb wherever He goes that no lie is found in their mouth (Rev. 14:5).

12. God’s Righteousness Revealed (49:1—62:12)

Defeatism and pessimism. I am deliberately directing your attention only to a few main thoughts, for these mighty prophecies should have a truly “edifying” effect on you. You have probably noticed that the book of Isaiah is like a symphony in that the same motifs come through repeatedly, with the major theme emerging ever stronger. The day of redemption is dawning.

The prophet struggles against defeatism and pessimism. Zion may complain that the Lord has forsaken and forgotten her, but Yahweh responds:

Can a woman forget her sucking child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of
her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.
Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me (49:15-16).

As the people gave expression to their despair, all sorts of things were being said about the Lord. But the prophet smashed all doubt.

It was said, for example, that Yahweh had sent away Judah, His wife, with a bill of divorce, and that He was forced by some superior power to sell her children to foreigners. Thus Yahweh was not only unjust but also powerless. In bold, revealing language, the prophet puts a stop to this unfair talk: “Behold, for your *iniquities* you were sold, and for your *transgressions* your mother was put away” (50:1).

A universal perspective. Let no one make the mistake of supposing that the Lord’s powers are limited: “Behold, by my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a desert” (50:2). Is the One who made a great nation of Abraham incapable of comforting Zion in exile? (51:2-3). Is the God of the Exodus unable to lead His people *out of exile*? (vs. 10-11).

After the fourth song about the suffering servant who is exalted (52:13—53:12) comes a description of the mother who is like Sarah in that she will receive a rich posterity (ch. 54). A new Jerusalem rises on a foundation of precious stones (see also Rev. 21). There will be a new David, who will witness to the nations and rule over them (53:3ff).

The reliable promises of favor made to David do not exclude foreigners or even eunuchs. If they live in the service of the Lord, they will receive a name and a monument. “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (56:7). Here we have a truly catholic or universal perspective that finds its fulfillment in the New Testament church.

A two-edged sword. The Word is a two-edged sword that cuts sharply. The antithesis is present here too. There is no universal reconciliation and atonement. Salvation is promised to the Jews in exile, but it is *demanded* that they live their lives in accordance with the will of the Lord.

It quickly becomes clear that there is a great deal wrong with the Jews. In chapters 57-59, a picture of *degeneration* is sketched—injustice, idolatry, desecration of the sabbath. Isaiah speaks for the people: “For our transgressions are multiplied before thee, and our sins testify against us” (59:12).

The light dims. Where are the people to look for deliverance? Behold! Day is dawning in the east! In fact, the light is sweeping across the whole world, for the Lord takes the initiative in redemption. For those who repent in Jacob, He comes as a liberator (59:15—62:12).

The helmet of salvation. In this context we read a striking statement: “He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon his head” (59:17). This “helmet of salvation” is an indication that the term *righteousness* has a *redemptive* significance.

Luther underwent a great struggle to understand this term. God is righteous and punishes us for our sins, he reasoned. Who, then, can stand when He puts on His breastplate of righteousness? But Luther’s eyes were opened when he read in Romans 1:17 that the righteousness of God is revealed *in the gospel*.

God’s righteousness has a redemptive effect for sinners—if only they believe. Thanks to this righteousness, the light of God’s grace can break through despite the darkness of sin.

Zion becomes the concentration point of all the nations. The year of Jubilee begins, and everything changes for the better. The daughter of Zion can no longer complain that she has been forsaken, and her land can no longer be called a wilderness. Her citizens are now called “the redeemed of the LORD,” and her new name is “Sought out, a city not forsaken” (62:12). As you read Revelation 21, you will find many echoes of these chapters of Isaiah, for its song about the future of the New Testament church draws on these poetic images.

13. Judgment and Promise (63:1—66:22)

The grapes of wrath. Deliverance involves settling scores with enemy nations. Edom had played a contemptible role in Judah's banishment to exile. In 63:1-6 we read that the Lord will appear as Edom's grape-treader, with the blood of His people spattered on His garments.

He is alone in treading the wine press, we read. Exegetes have often applied this text to Christ in His suffering, but there is no need to do so. What this text is talking about is simply the wrath of the Lord.

We also find the image of the grape-treader in the book of Revelation. The garment of the rider on the white horse is dipped in blood. We read that he "will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (Rev. 19:13, 15; see also 14:19-20).

We should not be repulsed by this image, for it underscores the great earnestness of the promises. The Good Shepherd treads the grapes of wrath. Heaven is deliverance from hellish power.

Clouds in the way. Later in the book it almost appears that clouds are blocking the vision of redemption. A petition about Zion is sent out: Where is the one

who caused his glorious arm
to go at the right hand of Moses,
who divided the waters before them
to make for himself an everlasting name,
who led them through the depths? (63:12-13).
For thou art our Father,
though Abraham does not know us
and Israel does not acknowledge us;
thou, O LORD, art our Father,
our Redeemer from of old is thy name (vs. 16).
O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down
(64:1).

The Lord then proceeds to answer all the complaints recorded in 63:7—64:12. His answer does not gloss over the issue of guilt.

He reports that He stretched out His arms to His people “all the day,” even though they continually offended Him with their open idolatry (65:1ff; see also Rom. 10:20-1). The Israelites had set a table for the gods of fortune and destiny (vs. 11). “Abominations” were eaten in hopes of purification (66:17). The day of the Lord was turned into a joke (65:5ff).

A somber ending. The Lord pronounces judgment on these apostate brothers as the book of Isaiah ends with a dark text about a worm that does not die and a fire that is not extinguished (66:24; see also Mark 9:48). The synagogue found this such an ominous ending that when the book was being read aloud, the second last verse was read once more after the concluding verse about the worm and the fire so that the reading would end on a note of promise.

We should resist the impulse to touch up or rearrange the somber ending of Isaiah, for this ending, too, is part of the comfort the book provides. The godless have no peace. The apostates scorn the “remnant” that chooses to be faithful to Yahweh; they scorn the “servants of the LORD.”

Universal salvation. The prophet has a comforting message for God’s servants. The glad tidings about a new heaven and a new earth resound in their ears. In colors borrowed from our earthly existence, the glory of the New Jerusalem is sketched. Zion’s population is numerous. The typical features of a prophecy of promise are all present.

Salvation is universal; it embraces people of all nations and tongues (i.e. languages). A colorful procession of foreign nations moves toward the restored temple. In this

exceptionally beautiful prophecy we read: “And they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as an *offering to the LORD*” (66:20). There will be place for a church assembly led by priests.

A broadened priesthood. It is striking that Paul sees his missionary activities in the same light in Romans 15:16. He describes himself as “a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be *acceptable* [to God], sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”

If we may assume that the word *them* in 66:21 includes the Gentiles, the priesthood is promised to “them” as well. The universal priesthood was already promised to all Israel (61:6), which meant that the opposition between “clergy” and “laity” would eventually have to disappear. Now this priesthood is broadened out to include *all* believers.

The eternal sabbath. On the holy mount there is a never-ending festival: “From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me” (66:23). This was later worked out in the Revelation to John, where our glorious future is sketched in terms borrowed from the Passover (the Lamb) and the Feast of Tabernacles (the palm branches). The great host composed of people of all nations serves God day and night.

The end of the book of Isaiah, which was written in the midst of deformation, doubt about the Lord’s promises, desecration of the sabbath, huckstering, and participation in mysterious heathen rites, envisions a new future. Christ Jesus, the Servant of the Lord, is the one who will bring us this future. He reveals the Father to us, wipes out our transgressions, calls the distant coastlands to the gospel,*

*These “coastlands”—the King James Version has “islands”—are the areas along the Mediterranean Sea, e.g. the west

creates the eternal sabbath, gives His church a foretaste of that sabbath, and makes His church into priests, a light for the nations.

Yet He also creates the outer darkness and judges all apostasy. The old order will pass away. All things will be made new, as our liturgy and weak voices are replaced by an eternal liturgy.

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
“My way is hid from the LORD,
and my right hand is disregarded by my God”?
Have you not known? Have you not heard? (40:27-8).

In accordance with His promises, we await a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells (65:17; 66:22; II Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1).

coast of Asia Minor (Ionia). Unfortunately, modern “prophecy” has sometimes found a different meaning in this text, namely, that the ten lost tribes went to western Europe, where they form the population of the Anglo-Saxon countries and some continental countries. Isn’t the Netherlands the Israel of the West? Baruch is alleged to have come to Ireland with Davidic princesses, one of whom then married the king of Ireland. Through this marriage, all the royal families in Europe are supposedly related to David. Thereby “David” actually rules in them. The movement proclaiming these ideas is often called the “British Israel” movement.

Actually, there was a direct fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy when synagogues that arose in Asia Minor and elsewhere in the “coastlands” attracted some pagans (the so-called “God-fearing” Gentiles). Later there was another fulfillment, when churches of Christ arose in faraway coastlands—think of the seven churches of “Asia.”

Jeremiah

Behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land (1:18).

1. The Prophet and His Times

Reformation under Josiah. There is a great deal of information available about the historical era in which Jeremiah preached. He was called to his prophetic office in the thirteenth year of King Josiah. In the eighteenth year of his reign, Josiah undertook a reformation of the temple services. In the books of Kings and Chronicles, we read that the king consulted the prophetess Huldah in connection with the threats in the book of the law (which had just been discovered), but we read nothing about Jeremiah. All the same, we may take it that Jeremiah's words of warning helped prepare the way for reformation under Josiah and generally had a stimulating effect. In the first six chapters

of the book of Jeremiah, we find passages drawn from his sermons before the reformation.

King Josiah fell in battle against Pharaoh Neco, who was on his way to Assyria to make war there. Josiah had trusted in the Lord's promises to Judah, but he had forgotten that the same Isaiah who spoke of "God with us" also warned against foreign entanglements: "In quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Is. 30:15).

The tangle of world politics. After a period of relative independence under Josiah came a chaotic period that ended with the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Judah was swept along in the tangle of world politics. Jehoahaz (also called *Shallum*) succeeded his father. He was soon arrested by Pharaoh Neco and succeeded by his older brother Eliakim (whom the Pharaoh called *Jehoiakim*). This lover of splendor did not care to listen to what Jeremiah had to say. No wonder! In blunt language the prophet admonished him for his tyranny, his shedding of innocent blood, and his collaboration with Egypt.

Meanwhile, there were major changes underway on the larger political scene. Assyria's capital city of Nineveh fell in the face of an attack by the allied Medes and Babylonians. These allies then turned on Egypt. Babylon's supremacy would have to be recognized in Jerusalem now, for Egypt was defeated at Carchemish and the Euphrates.

Judah's last kings. Jehoiakim did not want to listen to the words of the prophets and the language of world history. He rebelled against the dominance of Babylon, relying on Egypt instead. Nebuchadnezzar then besieged Jerusalem, his army looting the countryside till it was bare. Jehoiakim died in this siege; his dead body was thrown outside and given no more funeral honors than a donkey would receive (22:19).

Jehoiachin took his place, but after three months this

king capitulated. He and the other important figures were deported. The best craftsmen were also sent to Babylon. The finest plates and dishes in the temple were seized as booty of war.

Zedekiah (originally called *Mattaniah*) now became king. He was a brother of Josiah and an uncle of the two previous kings. Because he was weak in character, he was unable to keep the pro-Egyptian faction in check. The result was a new rebellion against Babylon. A foolish nationalism under the leadership of priests and false prophets looked to Egypt for deliverance. Jeremiah's warnings were in vain. After a struggle of a year and a half, Jerusalem was forced to surrender. A final deportation to Babylon followed, as flames did their destructive work in the city and the temple.

Migration to Egypt. As for the Jews who remained in the land of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah to rule them. After his murder by a jealous rival, the remaining Jews decided to migrate to Egypt. Jeremiah was forced to go with them. In Egypt he continued to prophesy against the perpetual apostasy from the Lord. Beyond that we lose track of this man of God. Legend has it that he was murdered in the land of the Nile.

This, in brief, is the historical context of the words spoken by Jeremiah on God's behalf. As you read through his prophecies, you would do well to keep this historical framework in mind; otherwise some of the implications of his words are bound to escape you.

Not all the prophecies are arranged in proper historical order. That's why it's all the more important to be familiar with the tragedy of the last kings of Judah. Read through the relevant portions of Kings and Chronicles once more. Then names like *Jehoiakim* and *Zedekiah* will no longer sound remote and distant.

A heavy burden. If the history of the era comes clearly to the fore in Jeremiah's prophecies, we are also told a great deal about the prophet as a *person*. Sometimes his words sound like his "confessions," for this office-bearer speaks about his concerns and struggles in a direct, open and honest way. His office is a heavy burden for him. The task assigned him is almost too much for a human being. He must oppose false prophets, priests, rulers, and public opinion.

Jeremiah would happily surrender his office, but the calling of the Lord is too strong for that; he is keenly aware of the need he is ordered to meet. Therefore he perseveres in calling for repentance, and later, when judgment has come, in prophesying about deliverance. The future looks dim, and by nature Jeremiah is not a man with a character of steel. Everything goes against him, but he carries on anyway. The calling of the Lord gives him the power to persevere.

*Behold, I have put my words in
your mouth (1:9).*

2. Jeremiah's Calling (1:1-19)

A priest's son. The first chapter of the book speaks of the prophet's calling. Jeremiah was a priest's son who grew up in Anathoth, the place where Abiathar had his property. Under normal circumstances, Jeremiah would have become a priest. But the Lord called him to serve elsewhere!

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations (1:5).

Jeremiah did not immediately declare his willingness to accept this task. He surveyed the future. He was still so young! Then how could he speak authoritatively against the tide of public opinion?

The Lord touched his mouth, and some promises followed:

To all to whom I send you you shall go,
and whatever I command you you shall speak.
Be not afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you.
Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations and
over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant (1:7-8, 9-10; see also 18:7;
24:6; 31:21; 42:10; 45:3).

The almond tree. The young, newly called prophet then had two visions—a branch of an almond tree followed by a boiling pot. The almond tree blossoms early and is a sign of spring. Hence the Hebrews spoke of it as the “watchful tree.” The Lord was also watchful: He would see to it that His Word was fulfilled. Jeremiah’s words would not be idle air vibrations but would be realized.

As you read the book of Jeremiah, you cannot help but be struck by this sensitive prophet’s practiced eye as an observer of nature and of life in general. He was acquainted with the descending vulture (49:22), the annual migration of birds (8:7), the ways of the lion and the leopard (4:7; 5:6; 12:8; 13:23; 49:19). He was familiar with the work of the cattle raiser and vineyard keeper and was acquainted with wedding joy and the dance.

The Lord instructed Jeremiah about what to say to the people, making use of his keen powers of observation. Whenever Jeremiah would see an almond tree during his

days of depression, it would give him comfort: the Lord watches over His Word and makes sure it is accomplished. (Hebrew uses the same word for *word* as for *thing*, i.e. *dabar*.)

The boiling pot. The second vision of the priest's son from Anathoth concerned the *content* of his message. To the people of the ancient Near East, north was the direction of darkness, the direction from which danger and misfortune most often came.

The boiling pot facing away from the north contains a clear message. Although no specific country is mentioned, it becomes clear that out of the mists of history, some destructive power will emerge to the north. At the outset it was sufficient for Jeremiah to know that something was indeed brewing. Misfortune was on its way because of Judah's apostasy.

Even if the people would not believe Jeremiah, as they did not believe Isaiah, that was no reason for him to be afraid. Yahweh would transform the young, naive, sensitive priest's son into an iron pillar and bronze walls. Doesn't the name *Jeremiah* mean *Yahweh establishes*?

The prophet would encounter opposition. Once more we hear the Immanuel promise: "I am with you to deliver you." In the days of persecution, Jeremiah was to hear those words repeatedly (11:20; 15:20; 17:18; 20:11).

Return, O faithless children, says the LORD (3:14).

3. An Appeal for Repentance (2:1—4:4)

A painful command. Jeremiah was commanded not to get married. (We don't know whether he was instructed

never to marry.) His life was to symbolize or reflect the widowhood of his people.

This painful command did not turn him into a man withdrawn from daily life and despising its pleasures, a man whose eyes were closed to life's beauty. On the contrary, life continued to excite him, although the command not to marry caused him pain. We even hear Jeremiah sanctifying marriage by calling it a reflection of the relationship between Yahweh and His people. (Hosea did the same.)

The Lord's bride. The first chapters of the book of Jeremiah date from the beginning of his prophetic career. Since the days in Egypt, the Lord had accepted the people as His bride, caring for her and lavishing attention upon her. But what did the bride do? She ran after the Baals. The northern kingdom of the ten tribes, the "faithless one," committed adultery. Yet the southern kingdom of Judah, the "false one," was not frightened into obedience by Israel's punishment. No, she committed spiritual adultery as well (3:6-10).

To make Judah jealous, Jeremiah was told to appeal to Israel to repent. Naturally, this was a symbolic appeal, for Israel was in exile. To the north the cry went out: "Return to the LORD, faithless Israel!"

A gracious invitation. Most exegetes apply 3:14ff to Israel, the deported Jews of the northern kingdom. Yet there are some who maintain that those words were addressed to Judah. Whatever the intention, they contain a gracious invitation: "I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion."

In certain mystical circles, this text has been assigned a grave meaning: man has little chance of being saved, since God chooses only a few—one here and one or two there. But the actual intent of this prophetic message is just the

opposite: even if just one in an entire city or two in a whole family are faithful, they are welcomed by the One who does not reproach His chosen and is no respecter of persons.

Note that *Zion* is seen as the center of things in the time of salvation. The symbol of the ark of the covenant is replaced by that of the throne of the Lord (3:16-17). All the nations proceed to Jerusalem. In his mind, the prophet already hears the confession of the returning Israelites (3:21ff).

But things haven't come quite that far—at least, not in Judah:

Break up your fallow ground,
and sow not among thorns.
Circumcise yourselves to the LORD,
remove the foreskin of your hearts,
O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem;
lest my wrath go forth like fire,
and burn with none to quench it,
because of the evil of your doings (4:3-4).

4. Wickedness Crying out for Judgment (4:5—10:25)

Primordial formlessness. Jeremiah was certainly faithful to his calling. How he prophesied about the misfortune approaching from the north! (The vision of the boiling pot had indicated that the danger would come from the north.) He declared:

My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!
Oh, the walls of my heart!
My heart is beating wildly;

I can not keep silent;
for I hear the sound of the trumpet,
the alarm of war (4:19).

It's not often that we hear sermons about Jeremiah 4:5ff.
Yet, what penetrating language we read there!

Jeremiah sees the land returning to the formlessness of
the primordial time:

I saw the earth, and it was without form and void;
the heavens, and their light was gone.
I saw the mountains, and they reeled;
all the hills rocked to and fro.
I saw, and there was no man,
and the very birds had taken flight.
I saw, and the farm-land was wilderness,
and the towns all razed to the ground,
before the LORD in his anger (vs. 23-6 NEB).

This passage is frightening reading. Hence it should speak
to twentieth century man with all his anxieties and fears.

We should note that Jeremiah's words do not contain
the threat of judgment in general, the kind of threat that
we find in many of the earlier paintings of the magic realist
Carel Willink, for example. Modern man interprets the
threat of judgment more as a feeling or projection of
something deep within him than as something God actually
brings about. Jeremiah is not recording his own emotions
but the Lord's message for a particular people—the
adulterous daughter of Zion (4:30), of the land of the
covenant people.

Corruption among the office-bearers. Jeremiah presents
us with a penetrating analysis of the situation. The man in
the street refuses to repent and turn to the Lord. And
society's leaders, who pretend to know it all, don't repent
either.

Monstrous, horrible things
are happening in the land:
the prophets prophesy falsely,
the priests teach whatever they please.
And my people love it! (5:30-1 JB).

The corruption among the office-bearers, of all people, is the main reason why Jerusalem's time is rapidly running out. These highly placed people try to put the best face on the situation by saying, "Peace, peace" when there is no peace (6:14). Luther quoted this very text at the end of his famous 95 Theses of October 31, 1517, condemning those who cried, "Peace, peace" in his time when there was no peace.

All who combat the spirit of the times can draw comfort from Jeremiah. His preaching and his appeal for reformation were rejected in the leading circles by people who prided themselves on self-sufficiency. All the same, Jeremiah persevered.

A sermon in the temple. A clear example of his preaching is his sermon in the temple, which is recorded in chapter 7 (see also ch. 26). Jesus later pointed back to Jeremiah's words: "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" (7:11; see also Matt. 21:13). Christ thereby took up His position on the same battleground where His prophetic predecessor had fought.

The struggle was not against the temple services as such but against misusing the worship center as a gathering place for evildoers and idolaters. At the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign, Jeremiah entered the temple, perhaps during one of the feasts, and declared: "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.' Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell

at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel" (7:4, 12). Here Jeremiah goes back to the history of earlier generations. The God who turned the Shiloh of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas into a shambles will not shrink from doing the same thing to the temple, now that "Shiloh's compromise" governs the city of Jerusalem and the temple.

Love and sacrifice. No doubt it strikes you as somewhat strange that Jeremiah declares in the name of the Lord that no commandments about offering sacrifices were given at the time of the exodus: the only commandment was that of obedience (7:21ff; see also 6:20; Amos 5:25; Mic. 6:6ff). Isn't Jeremiah guilty of exaggeration here? Weren't there various laws concerning sacrifices proclaimed at the time of the exodus?

Of course there were. What Jeremiah means to say—and emphasize—is that the bringing of sacrifices is not the most important thing commanded by the law. The most important thing of all is to love Yahweh!

If a boy at school fails all his subjects except for physical education, his father can rightly reproach him by saying: "I don't send you to school for physical education!" By saying this, the father does not mean to deny that physical education is a legitimate part of the curriculum; his point is rather that one subject should not draw all the boy's attention. Israel's situation as a schoolboy was analogous. He did very well in one subject, namely, Bringing Sacrifices. But when it came to Conduct and Work Habits and National History, he received failing marks. All the same, he dared to smile and say: "At least I passed Bringing Sacrifices"—as though the law could be fulfilled through rituals!

Impotent idols. Is there any way of escaping the judgment? Jeremiah would like to have withdrawn to the

wilderness (9:2), but he had to go on prophesying. Against the sweetly reassuring songs of the false prophets, he had to raise his lamentation:

Death has climbed in at our windows,
and made its way into our palaces;
it has cut down the children in the street,
the youths in the square.
Men's corpses lie
like dung in the open field,
like sheaves left by the reaper,
with no one to gather them (9:21-2 JB).

Another song issues from Jeremiah's lips, a song mocking the idols, which are as impotent as a scarecrow in a field of cucumbers. But Jeremiah also raises a song of praise to the Lord. Although the idols are called kings (e.g. Molech), *the Lord* is the Great King. Then comes a sentence that we find in the song of Moses and the Lamb: "Who would not fear thee, O King of the nations?" (10:7; Rev. 15:4).

*Blessed are you when men revile
you and persecute you, for so
men persecuted the prophets who
were before you (Matt. 5:11, 12).*

5. Stubborn Opposition to Jeremiah's Prophecies (11:1—20:18)

A murder plot. Under King Josiah, a covenant was made between the Lord and Judah. Given the threat of judgment, the people would surely repent. But under

Josiah's successors, they wanted to shake off the burden of the covenant again. Then Jeremiah, with his priestly spirit, was given a difficult command: "Do *not* pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will *not* listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble" (11:14; see also 7:16).

No prophet is honored in his own hometown (Luke 4:24), as Jeremiah found out. In Anathoth, where he was born and raised, a murder plot was hatched against him. Jeremiah felt that he was being led to the slaughter like a guileless lamb. Thus he had good reason to pronounce judgment on the men of Anathoth as he faced the suffering that threatened him as prophet.

The bells of judgment. The important thing for Jeremiah was to hang on to the God of his calling. Like the author of Psalm 73, he struggled to believe in God's righteousness. His persecutors would be as sheep destined for slaughter.

Jeremiah should not make the mistake of thinking this would be the last attack. If his own family was so opposed to the prophetic Word, what could he expect from others? Surely they would be no more sympathetic to his preaching.

The prophet was not permitted to give up. "If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?" (12:5). How could he stand as an iron pillar in the face of the powerful figures in Jerusalem if he was feeling discouraged already? Indeed, what happened at Anathoth was only the beginning of his pain (11:18—12:6).

Jeremiah had to carry on. Read further. You'll get a good impression of his work: the bells of judgment tolled steadily. The images succeed one another rapidly in Jeremiah's mind. Israel is a green olive tree (11:15ff), a vineyard destroyed (12:10), a priestly girdle that has

spoiled just as any cloth girdle spoils when buried (13:1ff).

All the inhabitants of Judah, from the highest to the lowest, will be smashed as a drunk smashes his flask. Trouble will come from the north; old friends will come as enemies. If Jerusalem is so eager to live by Babylon's *spirit*, then it will sink under Babylon's *power*.

A heavy price. Again, prayer is of no avail—not even the pleas and supplications of a Jeremiah or a Moses or a Samuel (see Ps. 99:6). Jeremiah is forced into a position of complete isolation: he travels through the country as a squabbling, contentious man. He is told to eat the Word of the Lord (15:10, 16) and does so with joy.

Jeremiah had to pay a heavy price for serving as prophet. His words of judgment spared no one:

I did not sit in the company of merrymakers,
nor did I rejoice;
I sat alone, because thy hand was upon me,
for thou hadst filled me with indignation (15:17).

It became too much for Jeremiah. He even went so far as to declare: “Thou art to me like a brook that is not to be trusted, whose waters fail” (vs. 18 NEB). These are grave words indeed! The office-bearer indicates that he does not trust the One he serves.

Restoration to office. The Lord is patient. He leads an overwrought Jeremiah back to the time of his first love: “If you return [repent], I will restore you,” that is, to the office of prophet. Here Jeremiah is again called to serve as prophet; he is restored to his office. The same words are spoken as when he was first called:

And I will make you to this people

a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,
but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you (vs. 20).

Jeremiah must have been very ashamed after this outburst against his only real friend, but the Lord saw to it that he did not develop a guilt complex because of it. It's almost like the apostle Peter being told after his denial of Christ: "Feed My sheep."

A dry, fruitless existence. Jeremiah's task was indescribably difficult. In chapter 16 we read that the Lord commanded him not to get married. Nor was he to enter any house of mourning or join in any wedding feast.

All this was a sign for Israel that the Lord was about to break up the ordinary course of life in Jerusalem. Comfort vanished, together with the jubilant voices of the bride and bridegroom. Judah's sin was written down with an iron pen (17:1). Through his dry, fruitless existence, Jeremiah, who loved life and his people intensely, was to serve as a symbol of the dry, brackish plains that Judah's farms would become.

In this moving section of Jeremiah, we read another confession voiced by the prophet. Mockers ask: "Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come if it can!" (17:15 NEB; see also II Pet. 3:4). Was Jeremiah perhaps proclaiming a message he had made up himself? For his part, he did not long for judgment:

I have not pressed thee to send evil,
nor have I desired the day of disaster.
Let those be put to shame who persecute me,
but let me not be put to shame (17:16, 18).

Here we are granted a glimpse of the prophet's heart. He struggles to stay on his feet and carry out his calling. "Thou art my refuge in the day of evil" (vs. 17).

Bucking public opinion. In 17:19-27 we are given a close-up of Jeremiah's struggle to maintain the sanctity of the sabbath. Striking are the promises he mentions in this context. There is still some hope of salvation. Earlier we also came across promises here and there (see 12:15ff; 16:14ff).

Jeremiah is not a prophet of judgment alone. Behind the dark night of exile lies the morning of a Messianic future. Later, as judgment comes closer, the prophet of doom begins to sing songs of deliverance, again bucking public opinion.

But things had not yet gone so far that judgment was already visible. The carefree life was still being led in Jerusalem. After all, the Lord was in the midst of His people!

Jeremiah tried to smash the people's complacency by using the image of the potter (ch. 18; see also Rom. 9:21; Is. 45:9; 64:8). Isn't the potter able to take a pot that didn't turn out and reduce it to a lump of clay so that he can make another pot from it? Is it then so strange that Yahweh should punish the apostate maiden Israel?

A cutting curse. These words led to some strong reactions, of course: there was talk of putting Jeremiah on trial. And there were surely enough corrupt office-bearers to ensure a conviction. In the next chapter we read how a new round of preaching on Jeremiah's part did lead to his arrest.

First we read a segment of Jeremiah's memoirs. In his hour of need, he turned to the Lord:

Remember how I stood before thee

to speak good for them,
to turn away thy wrath from them (18:20).

In the certainty that the Lord was with him, Jeremiah uttered a cutting curse. When we consider this passage with its curse—just as when we read psalms in which curses are uttered—we must not forget that the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of “His enemies and mine” (Lord’s Day 19). We may pray that God will make His justice felt when it comes to the church’s enemies.

The broken flask. The formation of the vessel made by the potter is a symbolic depiction of the sovereignty of the Lord. The *breaking* of the vessel is an image of judgment on something that is a mere creature (see Ps. 2:9).

Jeremiah goes out the Potsherd Gate to the refuse pit Topheth, in the valley of the son of Hinnom. (*Gehenna*, the word used in the New Testament for *hell*, is related to the name *Hinnom*.) Topheth is the place where children had been offered to Molech in the past. At this historical site, which Josiah had turned into a garbage dump, Jeremiah speaks about the judgment to be poured out over Judah and Jerusalem. He smashes a flask as an image of the coming destruction. From Topheth he goes to the court of the temple and repeats his proclamation of judgment.

A night in jail. At this point Pashhur, the chief officer of the temple, intervenes. Jeremiah has gone too far. The priest’s son is locked up in one of the temple gates for the night. When he is released the next morning, he goes right on with his program and preaches judgment to Pashhur.

What a night Jeremiah had gone through! Again he was confronted with the difficulty of his calling. Things had gone so far that he was actually locked up. His enemies were going a step further each time. What would they do next?

Wouldn't it be better to give up the prophetic office altogether? If Jeremiah had only become a priest, he would not have gotten into all this trouble. Why did he have to go on protesting in vain against oppression and tyranny? Why did he have to be subjected to so much mocking and so many taunts when he preached the Word of the Lord?

O LORD, thou hast deceived me,
and I was deceived;
thou art stronger than I,
and thou hast prevailed.
If I say, "I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot (20:7, 9).

This moving confession shows us again that prophets are not robots but people of flesh and blood. A series of emotions ranging from despair to triumph swirl around in Jeremiah's soul. At one moment he knows that the God of his calling is still with him, but at the next moment he joins Job in cursing the day of his birth. He curses the man who brought Hilkiyah, his father, the news of his birth. (From this we gather that his father was serving in the temple at the time.) Hilkiyah must have been glad to hear the news: a son to serve at the altar! But it turned out that his son became a prophet, a man of sorrows.

6. Prophecy Rejected as Treason (21:1—23:8)

A delegation from the king. However tormented Jeremiah may have been, he remained faithful to his of-

fice—both in the face of the common people and in the face of the rich and powerful. He continued to pronounce judgment in unequivocal language.

When Babylon besieged the city of Jerusalem, King Zedekiah sent a delegation to call on the prophet. The emissaries represented the power of the world and the church. Something of this sort had happened before, when King Hezekiah sent emissaries to Isaiah (II Kings 19). The emissaries who called on Isaiah were dressed in *penitential* sackcloth. Isaiah assured them that the Lord would spare Jerusalem from the attack of the Assyrians.

The delegates calling on Jeremiah, however, were not dressed in penitential garb. Their request was simply that Jeremiah pray to the Lord, asking Him to perform another of His wonders or mighty deeds, such as He had performed when Pharaoh and later Sennacherib threatened His people with destruction.

What was Jeremiah's response? He declared that Yahweh would strike His people with the threefold scourge of famine, the sword and pestilence. Just as He once led Israel out of Egypt with His strong arm and outstretched hand, He would now give His people into the hand of Babylon's king. Covenant obedience leads to blessing, but the *apostate* people had no reason to hope that "our dear Lord" would intervene by becoming their military genius.

National suicide. Jeremiah had some shocking advice for the curious public: Give up! Continuing the struggle against Babylon, whose vassal Judah had become, was tantamount to national suicide. The only alternative left was to abandon the city and go over to the Chaldeans. It was too late for the judgment to be revoked (21:8-10).

I can well imagine that the people did not regard Jeremiah's advice as *patriotic*. Wasn't the prophet betraying his country by talking that way? When the siege was temporarily lifted, Jeremiah left the city. His depar-

ture was interpreted as meaning that he was going over to the enemy side, and therefore he was arrested (37:11ff). Isn't this reaction on the part of the authorities understandable?

The norms by which Jeremiah acted were not drawn from some unknown, mysterious source: he took up his position on the basis of *special revelation*. He told the people that they were not obliged to obey a government that went contrary to God's commandments, a government that led them to the brink of catastrophe. Actually, Zedekiah had broken the covenant with Babylon. Because he had appealed to the name of the Lord in making that covenant, he offended the Lord by breaking it.

Jeremiah now showed the people a way to avoid the consequences of their king's double rebellion, namely, the way of life (see Deut. 30:19). They should subject themselves to the yoke of Babylon's king (see II Chron. 36:12-14).

David's house. The most horrible thing we hear in Jeremiah's words is a rejection of David's house. In the following prophecies this also comes to the fore (21:11—22:30). We read about Shallum (Jehoahaz), who ruled for only a short time, and Jehoiakim, who probably died during a siege. (Jeremiah prophesied that he would receive the "burial of an ass" far beyond the city.) We also read about Jehoiachin, who was deported by the king of Babylon. He was to die childless. Thus, no descendant of his would ever sit on David's throne. It was just as though Messianic hope was being snuffed out.

Yet, in this same context we read a glorious prophecy about the coming Christ. Before Jeremiah speaks about the other leaders (the false prophets), he utters a prophecy of salvation, this time taking up the theme of the Good Shepherd.

There will be good shepherds to replace the scatterers of the sheep. Yes, God will see to it that a righteous Branch

arises from David to rule as King and make the land flourish.

Righteousness. Although the last kings in David's line did not promote justice but instead created social disorder and trampled on the rights of the poor and weak, this Branch will be called "The LORD is our righteousness." This may be some sort of ironic pun on the name *Zedekiah* which means "The LORD is my righteousness."

The "righteousness" spoken of here is not just a matter of giving each person his due; it is much richer in content. It means salvation, the deliverance of the oppressed, rescue, acquittal. This is what Paul had in mind when he declared that Christ Jesus is our righteousness (I Cor. 1:30). Through Him we are justified and acquitted. Against the dark background of the deeds of Judah's last kings, then, stands a glowing prophecy about the coming Messiah.

What do straw and wheat have in common? (23:28 JB).

7. True and False Prophecy (23:9—29:32)

Spoiled figs. Some words of judgment against the false prophets complete the setting. The Lord will put an end to their practice of smoothing over evil and masking judgment. He will settle some scores with those who joke about "the LORD's burden" (23:23ff). What those false prophets preach comes out of their own hearts, and the effect of their preaching is to confirm the people in their attitudes and ways rather than to call them to repentance.

But if they had stood in my council,
then they would have proclaimed my words
to my people,
and they would have turned them from their evil way,
and from the evil of their doings (23:22).

From chapter 24 we learn something of the content of the sermons of the false prophets. They declared that the *exiled* Jews were wicked, while those who stayed behind under Zedekiah were the cream of the crop. Using the comparison of the basket of good figs and the basket of bad figs, Jeremiah let the people know that the *exiles* were really the ones with a future. Jerusalem was like a basket of figs that had spoiled.

The cup of the Lord's wrath. Nebuchadnezzar was to subject the world to his rule. The nations on which Judah fixed its hopes would drink from the cup of the LORD's wrath. Here again the prospect of *salvation* is not completely absent: the king of Babylon would also have to drink (25:26). This meant that after 70 years, Babylon, too, would be judged for its iniquities (vs. 12).

When you read the prophecies against the nations in chapters 46-51, you will note that roughly the same order is followed as in the catalogue presented in 25:19-26. This is no accident, of course. After the Lord made Judah and Jerusalem drink from the cup of His wrath, the neighboring nations would get their turn. The judgment was inescapable and worldwide. The Lord was bringing an indictment against the nations (vs. 31).

Preaching in the temple. Chapter 26 gives us a second report on the preaching in the temple. (Chapter 7 covers some of the same ground.) Now we see what the reactions were. The priests and false prophets wanted to kill Jeremiah, but the rulers and elders put a stop to their

plans. After all, Micah had prophesied against the city and the temple in Hezekiah's days (see Mic. 3:12) without being put to death by the king. Instead Hezekiah listened to what Micah said, and the Lord did not carry out the threat.

Thanks to this intervention Jeremiah was spared, escaping with a good scare. But how long could he go on this way? Uriah, a prophet from Kiriath-jearim, likewise preached against Jerusalem. Although he fled to Egypt, Jehoiakim's secret police managed to track him down. He paid for his prophecy with his life.

An iron yoke. Chapter 27 records a prophecy from the time of Zedekiah directed against the false prophets, the ones who declared that Judah would not remain under Babylon's dominance and that the dishes and bowls from the temple taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar would be returned (vs. 9, 16). Jeremiah wore a wooden yoke to represent Judah and the envoys from the neighboring nations who wanted to entice Judah to rebel against Babylon. But the false prophet Hananiah broke the yoke Jeremiah wore in the temple: within two years all the nations would be free of the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, he predicted.

Taken aback, Jeremiah went his own way, but the Lord summoned him: he was to prophesy to Hananiah that the Lord would lay an *iron* yoke on the shoulders of the nations. That same year Hananiah would die because of his vain lies. Yahweh was squaring accounts with the false prophets (ch. 28).

False prophets did not appear in Judah only; they were also to be found in the *land of exile*, where they misled the people with false prophecies of deliverance. We are warned that there will be false prophets seeking to lead us astray during the time of the new covenant as well (Matt. 24:24; II Thess. 2:9ff; II Tim. 4:3; II Pet. 2:1; I John 4:1; Jude,

vs. 18). Throughout the Bible, we are warned against the lies of the false prophets.

No false hopes. Jeremiah issued a warning to the exiles. They should not be deluded by false hopes but should “settle down” calmly in foreign Babylon for a period of 70 years. Even in Babylon the Lord would manage to track down the false prophets.

The point to remember as you read these chapters is that Jeremiah’s account of the corruption of the offices forms a background that enhances the depiction of the great office-bearer, i.e. “the LORD, our righteousness” (23:6). This background gives us a better perspective on the prophecies of salvation (ch. 30-33).

8. Proclamation by Word and Deed (30:1—33:26)

A voice of mirth and gladness. Jeremiah’s message was not restricted to words of *doom*: chapters 30-33 are full of *comfort*. Yes, the man who walked around with a yoke on his shoulders prophesied that Jacob’s yoke would be broken (30:8). The man who remained unmarried because of his office, who announced three times that the voice of the bride and the bridegroom would no longer be heard (7:34; 16:9; 25:10; see also Rev. 18:23), also prophesied about a voice of mirth and gladness, a voice of the bridegroom and the bride that would be heard again in Jerusalem (33:11).

Here we see once more that prophets swim against the stream. When everyone runs around full of patriotic visions, Jeremiah sees dark clouds. But now that the fall of Jerusalem is near, he speaks of a glorious dawn.

The God of his calling is watchful and will see to it that

His Word is accomplished. Just as He is watchful in plucking up and breaking down, He will now build and plant watchfully (31:28; see also 1:12, 10).

A new covenant. The time had come to stop speaking of the “guilt of the fathers,” for the Lord said He would make a *new* covenant with His people. The promise on the Lord’s side is that He will write His law in everyone’s heart and forgive sins (31:29ff). Whenever we speak of the “new covenant” (Latin: “*novum testamentum*”), we are pointing to this text.

With His blood, Jesus Christ brought about a new covenant. At the last supper, therefore, He spoke of “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20) and of “my blood of the covenant” (Matt. 26:28). The old covenant was dedicated by the blood of animals (Ex. 24:5ff), and the new covenant by the blood of our great High Priest (Heb. 7:22; 8:6ff; 9:18—10:18).

When we use the term *New Testament*, then, we should think of these comforting words of Jeremiah. We should also keep them in mind when we celebrate communion and Pentecost, for the blood of the covenant sanctifies us (Heb. 10:29). Through His Word and Spirit, Christ inscribes God’s law in our hearts (II Cor. 3:3).

Redeeming land. Jeremiah did not preach deliverance by *words* only; at God’s command he also proclaimed it through *deeds*. When things had gone so far that Jeremiah was locked up in prison and Babylon stood before Jerusalem’s gates, the Lord told him to buy a certain field in Anathoth—or better, buy it back—for his impoverished cousin Hanamel (see Lev. 25:25).

This deed seemed pointless at the time. That was how it struck Jeremiah, and in a prayer he let his feelings be known (32:16ff). The Lord revealed to him that the catastrophe would indeed come. Yet nothing, no Word of

promise, is too wonderful for the Lord to fulfill. There would be a return from exile, and Yahweh would make an eternal covenant with His people. Fields would be bought and sold, and deeds drawn up and signed.

Abundant prosperity. Jeremiah's redemption of his cousin's field while he was imprisoned and Jerusalem was besieged spoke of great things. The man of God who had moaned so much about the *destruction* of the land was now permitted to prophesy about the *blessing* of the land and the people. The Lord would take away guilt. Israel, once an apostate people, would be praised and lauded by all the peoples of the earth. The service of the tribe of Levi was not over yet, and the promises to David's house were still being fulfilled.

Here the features of the coming Messiah were made visible. For His sake, Israel would return from exile and Yahweh would forgive apostasy. Because of the Branch of the house of David, judgment was not the last word.

However difficult it may have been for Jeremiah to live in the midst of a people who hardened their hearts and brought judgment on themselves, he still caught sight of a glorious future through faith in God's promises. The Lord is "great in counsel and mighty in deed" (32:19). He keeps His Messianic promises and ultimately gives His people an "abundance of prosperity and security" (33:6).

9. Scandalous Unfaithfulness to the Covenant (34:1—35:19)

The year of Jubilee. Before we get to the prophecies about the nations in chapters 46-51, we are given more

material from the memoirs of Jeremiah (ch. 34-35). The degenerating situation is sketched very sharply.

The people no longer cared to listen to the prophetic Word. When Babylon appeared at the gates, of course, they were frightened. It was then decided that a certain provision of the law would be obeyed, by letting the slaves go free when the year of Jubilee came. In a solemn covenant involving both the leaders and the people, the people promised to let the Lord's grace shine through in "social" matters from then on.

How did this story turn out? Once Babylon lifted the siege, everyone took his own slave or slaves back. It became apparent that the conversion had been a necessity born of an emergency.

Through this covenant breaking, the people brought down judgment on their heads. Speaking on the Lord's behalf, Jeremiah declared in biting terms: "You have disobeyed me, by not each granting freedom to his brother and his neighbor. Very well, I in my turn—it is Yahweh who speaks—leave sword, famine and plague free to deal with you" (34:17 JB). The "rescue" of Jerusalem through the help of the Egyptians would only be temporary. All of Jerusalem would be laid waste.

The Rechabites. It was scandalous unfaithfulness that caused the people to fall. Jeremiah made this clear by pointing to the example of the Rechabites. The Rechabites were Bedouins (i.e. tent-dwellers) as a matter of principle. In Ahab's days, they had been commanded by their father always to live in tents and to avoid cultivating the ground. In the days of Jeremiah they were still true to this command to avoid culture.

The Rechabites became refugees in the face of the advancing Babylonian army. They left their tents and fled to the city. When wine was placed before them in one of the rooms of the temple, they refused to drink it. These

Rechabites, Jeremiah pointed out, remained faithful to a given command. Why couldn't *Israel* do the same? What a contrast between the faithfulness of the Rechabites and the unfaithfulness of the Israelites! Yet, how could one expect faithfulness if Judah's ruler himself despised the Word of the Lord?

10. The Fall of Jerusalem and Exile in Egypt (36:1—45:5)

The king's contempt. On a certain fast day, Jeremiah's secretary entered the temple with a scroll containing prophecies of Jeremiah and read the scroll to the assembled people. Some princes saw to it that the scroll was taken to the royal palace and read to King Jehoiakim. The king showed his contempt for Jeremiah's words in his response to the reading: each time a section was completed, he cut it off and threw it into the fire. He even ordered that Jeremiah be arrested.

Fortunately, he was unable to locate the prophet, who therefore had time to dictate another scroll to his secretary Baruch, in which he included even more words of judgment. Thus the preservation of the prophetic Word was assured.

Desertion? Under Zedekiah, Jeremiah was made a prisoner. The king himself was not unfavorably disposed toward the prophet. We saw earlier that he sent emissaries to Jeremiah to ask the prophet to pray for the land (22:1-10). Later, when the Babylonians withdrew temporarily, Zedekiah repeated this request (37:1-10). In both cases Jeremiah refused.

By sending those deputations, Zedekiah showed some

respect for the prophet of doom. The same could not be said of the “princes,” that is, the upstarts who assumed governmental leadership after the deportation of the nobility in 597. Those “princes” exploited Zedekiah, who was still the nominal ruler.

When Jeremiah left the city gate to go to Anathoth, he was arrested by the guards on a charge of deserting to the enemy. After all, hadn't the prophet frequently counseled surrender to the Babylonian army? Despite his protests, he was locked up in a dungeon cell.

Outline. To get an impression of the rest of Jeremiah's suffering, study the following survey.

37:17-21 First secret meeting with Zedekiah. Jeremiah is transferred to a better prison.

38:1-13 Jeremiah continues to counsel surrender to the Babylonians. The princes receive permission from Zedekiah to put him to death. The prophet is put in a cistern containing oozing muck. With the king's knowledge, he is hauled out of the cistern by a black eunuch.

38:14-28 Second secret meeting with Zedekiah. The king is advised to give himself up freely to Babylon.

39:1-14 Jerusalem is captured and destroyed. The population is deported. Only some of the poor are left. Jeremiah is treated with respect and allowed to stay in the city.

39:15-18 The promise to Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian who rescued Jeremiah from the cistern.

40:1-6 Jeremiah is let go. He attaches himself to Gedaliah, who is appointed governor, for he wishes to remain in his own land.

40:7-12 Return of the refugees. “Reconstruction” succeeds under Gedaliah the governor and Jeremiah the prophet.

40:13—41:15 At the instigation of the king of Ammon, one of the Davidic princes murders Gedaliah while the Feast of Tabernacles is being celebrated. The

same adventurer, Ishmael, also kills the people in the temple and then heads for the land of the Ammonites with his captives. His rebellion is broken, however, and his captives return.

41:16—43:7 The king of Ammon achieves his goal, for the rest of Judah, which might have become a blossoming population under the protection of Babylon, is overtaken by a feeling of hopelessness. Jeremiah advises the people to remain calm and continue with the reconstruction: “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your supplications before him: If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I repent of the evil which I did to you” (42:9-10). Here again we hear words of *salvation*! Will the Messianic promises now be fulfilled? (31:28). But it becomes apparent that the people are not ready to repent yet. They flee to Egypt and take Jeremiah and his secretary Baruch along. Again Judah rejects the Word of the Lord and seeks deliverance its own way (see also Deut. 17:16).

43:8-13 Jeremiah prophesies that the land of Pharaoh will not escape punishment either. Thus the Jewish refugees in Egypt are not safe. “He shall come down and smite the land of Egypt, giving to the pestilence those who are doomed to the pestilence, to captivity those who are doomed to captivity, and to the sword those who are doomed to the sword” (vs. 11; see also 15:3; Rev. 13:10).

44:1-30 It appears that the people will have to learn the hard way. The “queen of heaven” is worshiped, just as in the old days (see also 7:16ff; 44:15ff). Alongside “our dear Lord” they now revere “our beloved Lady,” i.e. the figure of Astarte, the mother goddess. However much Jeremiah warns against this spiritual suicide, the people refuse to give up their “Mary worship.” With specious arguments they defend the “usefulness” and “comfort” of such worship. This is the last we hear of Jeremiah. He announces God’s judgment to a people

of the Lord who deliberately go back to an earlier apostasy. Punishment is not to be escaped through emigration either. The Lord holds His people to the same norms on foreign soil as in their own land.

Here ends Jeremiah's biography as received through the pen of his secretary Baruch. Did he die a tragic death? He was a powerless old man who could no longer put his own stamp on his people. He did enjoy a few periods of "blessing," but even the reformation under Josiah only touched the surface of things: the seer sensed the superficiality of those efforts at reformation. The peaceful time under Gedaliah did not last long either. As the figure of Jeremiah recedes into the mists of history, we ask ourselves whether he was a prophet who struggled in vain.

Days of breaking down. Baruch must have wrestled with this question himself, for it was the problem of his own life too. It was not by chance that he concluded his description of the words and deeds of Jeremiah with a section about himself. He had often complained: "Woe is me, for the LORD has added grief to all my trials. I have worn myself out with my labours and have had no respite" (45:3 NEB). What did Jeremiah say to him?

Jeremiah, who had repeatedly been put in his place by the Lord, reminded Baruch of the great word that he, Jeremiah, had heard when he was called to be a prophet: "What I have built I am breaking down" (45:4; 1:10). What Baruch had to realize was that he lived in the days of breaking down. "Do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not; for, behold, I am bringing evil upon all flesh" (45:5). Baruch's only reward would be his life, that is, his *office*, his *duty*, his *calling*.

By concluding his sketch with this account of an event in the days of apostate King Jehoiakim, Baruch points out what it means for him, for Jeremiah, or for anyone called

by the Lord to carry out the duties of his office. The issue is *not* human happiness. We enter the Kingdom of God through much oppression.

What matters most is the continued presence and operation of the *Word of the Lord*. Jeremiah did not perform miracles, but he did speak. The God of *his* calling is still watchful today, making sure that His Word is accomplished.

11. The Lord Frustrates the Plans of the Nations (46:1—52:34)

Egypt. Jeremiah had been called to be a prophet to the nations (1:5). That's why the book of Jeremiah in its present form closes with a series of prophecies about the nations already mentioned in 25:19ff.

Egypt is first. Egypt, the land the Jews depended on in their struggle against Babylon, was also the land where Jeremiah was taken against his express advice and wishes. For some reason, the Jews long expected deliverance from the people who had once enslaved them.

Judgment would not pass Egypt by. In poetic, picturesque language, the prophet sketches the coming judgment and ends with a prophecy of salvation for Jacob, for Israel, for the people of the covenant made with the forefathers.

Other nations. The Philistines would not be overlooked, nor would proud Moab escape. In connection with Moab, Jeremiah cites a prophecy of his predecessor Isaiah (see 48:31-3; Is. 16:7-10). Yet there is still something of a promise left for Moab, just as there is for Ammon (48:47; 49:6).

Edom with its wise men will fall prey to Babylon, as will the great city of Damascus, the center of Syria. Ancient Elam (on the Persian Gulf) and the Arab Bedouins, the people without gates or bars, will fall to Babylon too. Like a consuming fire and a raging flood, the Babylonians will sweep over the nations bringing judgment. But idolatrous Babylon will be judged in turn.

Babylon. We are told in no uncertain terms *why* Babylon must be judged. Hadn't Yahweh used this nation as a rod in His hand? Was He now going to break the instrument He had used? Indeed He was, for Babylon had opposed Him (50:24). In her pride and conceit, she defied the Lord (vs. 29). In her treatment of God's people, she went beyond the boundaries He imposed (51:24). Babylon, the "servant of the LORD," continued to live in the service of Bel—think of the god Baal, whose name means *lord*—and of Marduk or Merodach (50:2; 51:47).

The "proud one" (i.e. Babylon) will stumble and fall (50:32). Babylon itself will feel the edge of the sword (see the "song of the sword" in 50:35-8). At the same time, the Israelites in Babylonian exile will experience the delivering hand of the Lord (50:17-20, 33-4).

Babylon is incurable, but

The LORD has brought forth our vindication;
come, let us declare in Zion
the work of the LORD our God (51:10).

In the King James Version we read: "The LORD hath brought forth our righteousness." Here the term *righteousness* again means *the Lord's redemptive deeds!* Even these dark chapters, then, speak of deliverance.

Redemptive righteousness. Just imagine what a comfort these chapters must have been to the Jews when they were

read aloud in the synagogue. There were always new oppressors—but Yahweh would bring His redemptive deeds to light! In the New Testament it becomes clear that the redemptive righteousness by which we are justified is revealed in Christ.

Therefore the last part of Jeremiah, which is little known even among people well versed in the Bible, is of exceptional importance for today's church. Note that Jeremiah twice quotes sections of his previous prophecies. In 51:15-19 he quotes 10:12-16, which deals with the greatness of King Yahweh as compared to the idols, and in 50:41-3 he quotes 6:22-4.

Interchangeable judgment. The latter quotation is especially instructive. In 6:22ff, Jeremiah speaks of the mysterious “enemy” from the north, in the context of a prophecy directed against *Israel*. The Lord is the unchangeable One; He is the King of the nations (10:7).

Because Babylon has ventured beyond its bounds, it will have to face the “enemy” from the north! “Behold, I will stir up the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon, against the inhabitants of Chaldea” (51:1). The Medes, who had once been allies of the Babylonians, would now defeat them (vs. 28).

Just as *the church* is judged, then, *the world* is judged. Hence we could speak of a certain interchangeability of judgment threats. In Revelation 18 we read about the judgment of Babylon. There you will find texts that remind you of Jeremiah's prophecy about Babylon's judgment.* But this chapter of Revelation also includes expressions borrowed from Old Testament passages of judgment directed against Israel (see 25:10; Rev. 18:23).

We must take this “interchangeability” seriously, for

*The last chapters of Jeremiah must have been very well known in the synagogue and therefore in the early church. John

what it means is that a judgment threat never applies to the “wicked world” alone. If the church subjects itself to *Babylonian influences*, she can count on suffering a *Babylonian judgment*. There is a definite connection between Jeremiah’s talk of casting a book weighted with a stone into the Euphrates (51:63) and Jesus’ talk of casting an offender who causes little ones to sin into the sea with a millstone around his neck (Mark 9:42) and John’s vision of an angel casting a stone like a great millstone into the sea as a symbol of Babylon’s judgment (Rev. 18:21).

Destruction and elevation. The book of Jeremiah closes with an account of the destruction of Jerusalem and the later elevation of King Jehoiachin in exile. This account is borrowed largely from the book of Kings. The appendix about Jehoiachin underscores what was said at the time of Jeremiah’s calling: “I am watching over my word to perform it” (1:12).

This emotional book about the words and deeds of a prophet who was so much a human being should strengthen us when we meditate on its main emphasis. However much things may change, whether it be “2001” or “1984,” we know that the God of the covenant will watch over His Word of promise and judgment. The name *Jeremiah* means *Yahweh establishes*.

makes extensive use of these chapters in his “prophecy.” Compare the following passages:

Jeremiah 50:8	with Revelation 18:4
50:31-4	18:8
50:39	18:2
51:6, 9	18:4
51:8	18:2
51:9	18:5
51:63-4	18:21

Lamentations

1. The Church in Mourning

The fall of the church. In Israel it was customary that a *lamentation* be sung in a house where someone had died. The Bible includes a collection of five lamentations. They deal with a death—the death of the daughter of Zion! They are lamentations about the destruction of the city and the temple.

They do not deal only with the disappearance of *outward* splendor. We must make no mistake about this point. The reason for the lament raised here is the fall of the church.

Jerusalem was the spiritual center; it was God's residence. There the leaders of Judah lived, and there the ruler, the priest and the prophet were to be found. The theocracy (i.e. God's rule over His people) made use of the temple and the officials in it to lead the people. Through these organs, the covenant relationship was supposed to develop.

But now the enemy had come and destroyed everything. The work of the office-bearers in Jerusalem had come to a

halt; the sword made short work of them. And the temple, the place of reconciliation, simply didn't exist after the radical destruction. It appeared that God had eliminated His people from the row of the nations. The covenant relationship seemed to have come to an end.

A grim feast. The suffering of the church is the subject of Lamentations:

The roads to Zion mourn,
for none come to the appointed feasts;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan (1:4; see also 2:6).

On the other hand, it is as though the Lord had declared a special "day" for the church, a day of festival celebration. Still, it is a grim feast, for the *enemy* reigns unchallenged.

The Lord has scorned his altar,
disowned his sanctuary;
he has delivered into the hand of the enemy
the walls of her palaces;
a clamor was raised in the house of the LORD
as on the day of an appointed feast (2:7).

The Lord flouted all my mighty men
in the midst of me;
he summoned an assembly against me
to crush my young men;
The Lord has trodden as in a wine press
the virgin daughter of Judah (1:15; see also 2:22).

This "day of the LORD" was indeed a horrible day for the theocracy. The king, the Lord's anointed, was captured, despite his attempt to escape (4:20). Both priest and prophet were murdered in the sanctuary (2:20). In fierce anger, the Lord cut down all the might of Israel (2:3).

The strength of the land had disappeared. Jerusalem's king and princes found themselves lined up among the people of all nations. There was no longer any instruction in the law, and the prophets received no more visions from the Lord (2:9).

Confessions. From the depths of this misery, complaints ascended. But the book includes more than just lamentations; it presents us with confessions as well. Jerusalem had sinned greatly: "The crimes of the daughter of my people have outdone the sins of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, no time for a man to wring his hands" (4:6 JB; see also 1:8).

The author of this lamentation knows that it was the Lord Himself who overthrew Zion (1:21; 2:6, 17). Thus it would do no good to complain about the *consequences* of sin. Instead the people should complain about the *sins themselves* and repent. Perhaps the Lord would then be gracious (3:38ff).

Apostate leaders. As this awareness of sin breaks through, there is also a recognition that the offices functioned in a wrong, anti-Messianic way:

The kings of the earth did not believe,
or any of the inhabitants of the world,
that foe or enemy could enter
the gates of Jerusalem.
This was from the sins of her *prophets*
and the iniquities of her *priests*,
who shed in the midst of her
the blood of the righteous (4:12-13).

Your *prophets* have seen for you
false and deceptive visions;
they have not exposed your iniquity
to restore your fortunes,

but have seen for you oracles
false and misleading (2:14).

The contemporary relevance of Lamentations comes clearly to the fore. Today there is plenty of reason to lament about apostate “spiritual leaders,” misled “laymen,” scorn for the church’s confessions, and indifference to the threat of God’s judgments. We are all preoccupied with our individual salvation.

Never forget that the salvation of each one of us is bound up with the condition of the church. We may not isolate ourselves from the entirety of God’s action in gathering His chosen ones. It should cut us to the quick to hear false, unchristian doctrines being proclaimed in the name of Christianity and the church. Isn’t that something to regret deeply?

*You should not grieve like the
rest of men, who have no hope (1
Thess. 4:13 NEB).*

2. A Book of Great Beauty

Restoration and conversion. The book of Lamentations is also relevant to our time in another respect: it sings of the abiding faithfulness of our covenant God.

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is thy faithfulness (3:22-3).

Through all the grief shines the awareness that the Lord remembers His covenant:

But thou, O LORD, dost reign for ever;
thy throne endures to all generations.
Why dost thou forget us for ever,
why dost thou so long forsake us?
Restore us to thyself, O LORD, that we may be restored!
Renew our days as of old! (5:19-21).

This talk of restoration is a reference to the return of the Jews from exile. But it also means genuine conversion, a renewal of the heart, a renewal of national life, a restoration of the covenant relationship.

The Lord would have to bring this about. Here the motif of *free grace* is raised again. There is to be no worldly grief, for such grief leads to death (II Cor. 7:10).

Elegant in diction and style. In the first four lamentations, just as in some of the psalms, each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Thus these songs were composed in accordance with a certain model.

Because the Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, these lamentations are made up of 22 verses. The third lamentation gives three verses for each letter and therefore has 66 verses in all. Here again we see that the Bible is a book of great beauty.

It may strike you as strange that a book like Lamentations should be composed in such an orderly, calculated way. Doesn't this conflict with its deeply emotional content?

It is clear from this unique book, from beginning to end, that its author sings about experiences he has lived through himself. Yet his laments do not form a wild chaos; they are presented in an order based on the order of the letters of the alphabet. This adds greatly to the beauty of the book. In an annotation to a Dutch equivalent of the King James Bible, we read: "This little book is so elegant in its choice of words and its literary style that not a single writing of

even the most eloquent heathen author may be compared to it.”

The five lamentations were used by the Jews in worship services in the synagogue, for example, to remember the destruction of Jerusalem. Isn't there a connection between holiness and beauty? The number five reminds us of the five books of the Torah and also of the five books of Psalms.

The book of Lamentations is not very well known in the church of the new covenant. Why not? Because we have nothing to complain about? Because the church is flourishing today? In accepting the Old Testament as part of the canon, the New Testament church also accepted these songs of lamentation. Why don't we include them in our hymnals, as we do the Psalms?

Ezekiel

1. The Prophet of the Exile

Two parts. The prophet Ezekiel was deported in 597, at the same time as King Jehoiachin. Many priests and aristocrats were carried away in that deportation. The nation's most prominent citizens formed a community in exile, while the proletariat remained behind in Jerusalem under King Zedekiah, who ruled under the sufferance of Babylon. In 586 there was a second deportation, after Zedekiah violated his oath to Babylon and rebellious Jerusalem was conquered.

The “church” had been separated into two parts—one part in Jerusalem and the surrounding territory and the other part along the rivers of Babylon. The people in Jerusalem took a contemptuous view of the exiles. The exiles, after all, were their former leaders. Surely they deserved the punishment they were receiving! The people in Jerusalem did not think of themselves as undergoing punishment, for they continued to enjoy God's blessings. That was how *they* interpreted events.

The people in exile did not grasp the full gravity of the

situation either. Like the French refugees who dreamed unrealistic dreams about a Protestant restoration in France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685), the Jewish exiles cherished the hope that they would be able to return to the city of their fathers.

Not a defeat for Yahweh. In this situation the Lord sent Ezekiel to proclaim the Word of God. He was to draw the attention of the Jewish community to the sentence imposed on Palestine: it was no accident that Jerusalem fell and the Jews were deported. Ezekiel was to dash cold water on any lingering hope that Jerusalem's independence would be restored. This sensitive, priestly figure was called upon to open the eyes of the people to Yahweh's words of judgment, which had been realized in their time. Time and again the Lord told His people: "You shall know that *I am the LORD*"!

This declaration could be set as an epigraph above Ezekiel's entire book of prophecy. The Lord vindicates Himself, especially in the *judgment on Jerusalem*. He watches over His own honor.

Ezekiel was to break down all pride and optimism. The people of the exile had to be shown what was actually happening as Jerusalem was reduced to rubble. The destruction of the city was not a defeat for Yahweh, nor could it be equated with the destruction of the church. No, it was the *only* route by which Yahweh would bring His salvation. It pleased the Lord to create a *new* people from the miserable Jews in exile. There was a bright future ahead—in God's time.

A new Jerusalem. After Ezekiel had preached judgment for a number of years, the exiles received some bad news: the city of Jerusalem had fallen. This led to a change in the prophet's emphasis: from chapter 34 on, we find prophecies of *salvation*. The same prophet who first took

away all grounds for earthly nationalistic hope now begins to *comfort* his people. (We find a similar turn in the preaching of Jeremiah.)

Yahweh, who drove Judah out of Jerusalem for the sake of His name, would now restore Jerusalem for the sake of His name. Ezekiel had visions of a new temple and a new Jerusalem. All the enemy powers are defeated. Paradise returns. The name of the city is “The LORD is there.” Thus men will know that He is indeed the Lord.

2. Ezekiel’s First Calling: Prophet of Judgment (1:1—3:27)

A heavenly blue throne. In the famous psalm of the exiles in Babylon, we hear some strong language: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!” (Ps. 137:5). This famous oath also dominated the thinking of Ezekiel. Hadn’t the Lord identified Himself with His beloved city? Wasn’t Jerusalem the place He had chosen? Wasn’t that where the altars stood? Didn’t Yahweh, Jerusalem and the temple form a cord made of three strands?

Yet, what did the prophet-priest in exile see? It was as though the cherubs had left the temple and carried the throne of Yahweh through the land of the exiles. In a great cloud, four creatures composed of various parts of men and animals approached. Next to them were wheels that seemed to be able to go in any direction. Above them (1:22ff), above the firmament over their heads, stood what appeared to be a heavenly blue throne on which a shining, majestic figure sat.

“Wheel within a wheel.” Allegorizing and spiritualizing

interpreters find a great deal to work with in such visions. Think of all that has been said about the “wheel within a wheel,” for instance, in a Negro spiritual:

Zekiel saw the wheel of time,
Wheel in the middle of the wheel,
Every spoke was humankind
The big wheel run by faith,
Little wheel run by the grace of God,
Wheel within a wheel,
'Way in the middle of the air

A Dutch interpreter declares: “The gallows on which Haman himself was hanged is a wheel within *his* wheel. The angel who killed the Assyrian soldiers is a wheel within Sennacherib’s wheel.”

The one wheel is interpreted as a human wheel, then, and the other as a divine wheel. But this is an arbitrary interpretation. Try reading this passage in the light of your knowledge of the Scriptures without relying on any preconceived notions. The passage is about the wheels of *God’s chariot throne*, which cannot be halted or diverted. By the power of the Holy Spirit, its wheels can move in any direction. And they know what they are doing, for they are full of eyes.

An Old Testament crossbearer. From above the cherubs, an imposing voice is heard (1:25). This voice addresses the frightened Ezekiel. He is called to serve as a prophet in exile (ch. 2), given a scroll full of lamentation, mourning and woe, and commanded to eat it. He is ordered to bring the Word—and nothing else—to his unbelieving people (3:4ff).

Ezekiel is made a watchman over the house of Israel. If he does not warn the godless, their blood will be on *his* hands (3:16ff). “He that will hear, let him hear; and he

that will refuse to hear, let him refuse” (3:27). The Lord, whose throne is above the cherubs, had called him to his difficult post. And Ezekiel obeyed—even though the task assigned him was a difficult one. He was an Old Testament crossbearer.

3. Hunger, the Sword and Pestilence (4:1—7:27)

Peculiar commands. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s chief propagandist, once spoke of “playing soldier in a sand-box” in connection with the battle of North Africa. Ezekiel was now called by the Lord to “play soldier.” On a brick he was to sketch the layout of the city of Jerusalem and then build miniature siege works around it. Between himself and the city he was to place an iron plate to signify that an impenetrable “iron curtain” blocked the city’s access to Yahweh.

The prophet was given more peculiar commands. He was to lie on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for 40 days. His bare arm would be a warning about the punishment the city was about to receive. He was not allowed to eat much during this period. The small, measured helpings he was permitted were to be cooked on dung (ch. 4).

A time of woe. All of this was a prophecy about the coming time of woe, the misery of besieged Jerusalem. The unholy trio of pestilence, hunger and the sword (5:12) would soon go about its destructive work. Because Yahweh had been offended, He was making His jealousy and anger felt (5:13). The desecration of the sanctuary had aroused His covenant wrath (vs. 11). On all the high places, Israel had served idols. Every high place would be

destroyed in judgment. Only a “remnant” would repent and be converted in exile, learning the source of all the misery (ch. 6).

Steadily we hear the chant throughout chapter 7: “The end is coming! The end is coming! Behold, the day has arrived—the sword outside our walls, and pestilence and hunger within!” Everything collapsed. No one was prepared for battle, even if the trumpet should be sounded.

The “services” of the prophet and the priest “didn’t work” any more (7:26). The government didn’t know what to do (vs. 27). Capital was no help (vs. 19). The idols were put to shame. “I will deal with them as they deserve, and call them to account for their doings; and so they shall know that I am the LORD” (7:27 NEB).

4. Abominations in the Holy Place (8:1—11:25)

A visit to the temple. Were things really as bad as Ezekiel said? Was there no way out? In another vision the prophet was shown that the judgment could not be averted.

On a day when the elders of Judah were consulting him, the Spirit of God transported him to Jerusalem in a vision. There Ezekiel visited the temple complex. In exile he had often wished he could enter the temple gates! Now his wish was finally granted: “in the Spirit” he found himself in the court of the temple. “Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!” (Ps. 122:2).

International false religion. What a disappointment for Ezekiel when he went inside! He saw nothing but abominations, that is, idolatrous activities and cultic objects. At the northern gate there was an image of the Canaanite goddess Astarte (8:3), the goddess of sex.

Somewhere in a room in the temple he found 70 elders busy devoting themselves to an Egyptian mystery religion under the leadership of a son of the reformer Shaphan (8:7ff). Babylonian worship was going on in the temple as well: women were weeping over the death of the god Tammuz (vs. 14).

Men even bowed down in the direction of the rising sun in the east, with their backs to the temple. Thus the temple was being *desecrated* by international false religion. Didn't such an abomination in the Holy Place cry out for judgment?

The Lord's departure. Ezekiel was allowed to see the judgment being carried out. First of all seven men approached. One of them put a mark on the forehead of every person in the city who was unhappy about the abominations committed in the temple. That mark was protection against judgment. The other six killed all the people who did not have the saving sign on their foreheads.

Then Ezekiel saw the Lord's chariot throne again, which he had first seen in exile. This chariot stood before the temple, to "pick up" Yahweh, as it were. The Lord was *leaving* the temple. He departed hesitantly, step by step, but the glory of the Lord was indeed removed from the temple. "Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate" (Matt. 23:38). Later in the New Testament we read: "For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God" (I Pet. 4:17). The cherubs accompanying the chariot scattered burning coals over the city (10:2, 6-8; see also Rev. 8:5). It was *too late* to save the city or the temple.

A new spirit and a heart of flesh. In his vision Ezekiel had to prophesy against a gathering of 25 elders (perhaps the same elders who had earlier been so busy worshiping the sun in the Babylonian manner). These men believed they

had nothing to worry about. Confidently they declared: “The city is a stewpot and we are the meat in it” (11:3 NEB). But Ezekiel let them know that the city was not a pot that would protect them.

While he was prophesying to them, one of the rulers fell down dead. This led Ezekiel to pray: “Ah Lord GOD! wilt thou make a full end of the remnant of Israel?” (vs. 13). Here Ezekiel was interceding for his people, just as the prophets Amos and Jeremiah had done.

The Lord gave him a clear answer. He must not let himself be influenced by the proud language of Jerusalem, by the people who despise their brothers in exile because the Lord and His temple are far from them, by the people who think they are in control of their own land. The Lord will choose His remnant from the *exiles*. There He will recruit His future church.

The Jews in exile will one day be given the opportunity to return, that is, to return to the *service* of the Lord, with a new spirit and a heart of flesh.

Ezekiel was then allowed to see the glory of the Lord departing from the temple. He knew that the judgments were part of God’s way of realizing His plan of salvation. God would again be the *Holy One* of His people (11:13-25).

No nationalistic dreams. Remember that the Lord showed these things to Ezekiel to teach the prophet to fix his hopes not on Jerusalem but on Yahweh alone. How clearly Yahweh speaks in priestly images!

It was Ezekiel’s task to direct his words to the leaders and people in exile, discouraging any nationalistic dreams. Covenant judgment was on the way!

The Lord is also speaking to *us* through Ezekiel. The use the New Testament makes of the book of Ezekiel (especially in the book of Revelation) indicates how relevant these prophecies are to today’s church.

The second destruction of Jerusalem resulted from the

same sins as the first. But even with the second destruction, God's plan for salvation did not perish: the Jerusalem above will bring forth children. Just as it is certain that all apostasy from the Lord will be judged, so it is sure that when the end of time comes, there will be a remnant, a people living in covenant with Yahweh.

5. False Prophets Promising Peace (12:1—14:23)

Public opinion. We can't help but be amazed at the great variety of symbolic deeds Ezekiel had to perform to convince his fellow exiles of the hopeless position of Jerusalem and its leaders. Unfortunately, the "they" of "They say . . ." paid no attention to him. Public opinion simply maintained that life goes on. Soon the visions were forgotten (12:22). Some argued: "The vision that this man sees concerns the distant future; he is prophesying for times far ahead" (vs. 27 JB). For that very reason, the prophet had to go on with his work.

One day he was observed leaving his house by an unusual route, carrying all the baggage an exile would carry (ch. 12). That's what Israel's king would look like when the time came for him to flee. He would be caught in a net and brought to Babylon.

Whitewashing a split wall. How could the people persist in hoping that Jerusalem would be spared? Hadn't all the faithful prophets proclaimed that judgment was coming? Indeed they had, but there were also false prophets who said deceptive things in the name of the Lord and preached about spurious visions.

It shouldn't surprise us to read that the false prophets were well received. Ezekiel compared their activity to

whitewashing a split wall. Would their superficial restoration, their assurance that nothing was wrong, help when the hour of doom finally arrived?

At the end of his famous 95 Theses, Luther appealed to the words of Ezekiel in 13:10ff.

92. Away then with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, “Peace, peace,” and there is no peace!

93. Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, “Cross, cross,” and there is no cross!

94. Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their head, through penalties, death, and hell;

95. And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace.*

No divided loyalties. Let there be no false proclamations of peace, then. Ezekiel, for one, abided by that rule. Everyone who proclaims the Word of the Lord today must follow it as well. That’s why it’s so important for us to see how the prophet made his message heard in a revealing, unsparing way.

There is no room for divided loyalties or for any attitude that looks to the Lord for help in time of need only. Woe to the prophet who tailors his message to his audience! (14:1-11).

The dawn of grace is to be seen even in this section of Scripture: we are told that the hour of salvation will surely arrive (vs. 11, 21-3). But first the fourfold judgment approaches unrelentingly. Even the prayers of such men as Noah, Daniel and Job could not hold it back (vs. 14, 20).

**Martin Luther’s 95 Theses*, ed. Kurt Aland (St. Louis and London: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 58.

5. When the Very Best Spoils (15:1—21:32)

Playing the harlot. There's nothing worse than allowing the very best to spoil. Jerusalem is a vine of high quality. But when a vine brings forth no fruit, not even its wood can be used (ch. 15). It is thrown in the fire and burned up! (John 15:6).

When Christ speaks of Himself as the vine, He is drawing on a comparison made by such Old Testament figures as Ezekiel and Isaiah (see Ezek. 15, 19; Is. 5; Ps. 80). This shows us again that the Old and New Testaments are one and belong together.

Their unity is also evident when we turn to Ezekiel 16, where the church is depicted as a young maiden that the Lord found, made His own, and cared for. He entered into a *covenant* with her and took her under His protection. She became His. But what did this young woman do? She played the harlot by running after other lovers, e.g. the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians.

In the New Testament we find the same image applied to the church. Christ speaks of the Israel that lived during His days on earth as an “adulterous generation,” and Paul compares the relation between Christ and His church to marriage. In the book of Revelation we are given a portrait of the great whore. The church, by contrast, is presented as a pure bride. Revelation tells us about the judgment of this apostate woman. What we read there is closely bound up with what we read in Ezekiel 16 on the same subject.

Forthright language. You will note quickly that the language is far from prudish. The prophet Ezekiel—like other writers of the Bible—calls a spade a spade. This should not offend us; what should offend us instead is our hypocritical Western secrecy about sexual matters—an attitude that keeps us from singing the Song of Songs.

The Bible can speak forthrightly about the degeneration of sexual life because it has a Word of *grace* for this dimension of our existence. Sexual life reflects the best and most beautiful thing there is—the relationship between the Lord and His people.

Ezekiel is allowed to preach that the Lord will restore the relationship despite Judah's straying from the path: "I will remember the covenant I made with you when you were young" (16:60 NEB; see also vs. 62-3). There will be a reconciliation.

Broken covenants. Although there is reason to be hopeful about the future, Ezekiel does not shrink from pointing out Judah's covenant unfaithfulness time and again. Not only did Judah break its word to the Lord, Zedekiah and company broke their covenant with Babylon by their political alliance with Egypt (ch. 17). The breaking of that oath would lead to destruction.

The Jews tried to shrug off their responsibility for this matter by saying: "The *fathers* have eaten sour grapes, and the *children's* teeth are set on edge" (18:2). But the Jews would not get away with putting all the blame on the shoulders of their "fathers."

Sin and unrighteousness. Naturally I do not mean to deny that there is a solidarity between generations. Yet, everyone remains responsible for *his own* misdeeds. The ten commandments, after all, use the singular form of the pronoun *you*. (This is a point we might easily overlook, since we do not distinguish between the singular and plural forms of this pronoun in modern English.)

The person or "soul" who has sinned is the one who will die. A son will not share in the unrighteousness of his father. The sons of Korah did not die with their father. Therefore it is wrong to say: "The way of the Lord is not just" (18:25, 29; 33:17). The fact of the matter is that the

ways of the *house of Israel* are not just. Judgment is approaching not just because of the sins of the fathers but also because of the unrighteousness of the children. Repent, and live! Once more we hear the ancient prophetic appeal.

An indignant refusal. But will the house of Israel repent? It is clear that the attitude of the king's house in Jerusalem has *not* changed. Therefore the prophet must raise a lamentation about the princes of Israel. We hear familiar sounds: a lion that is captured and a vineyard that dries up and is burned (ch. 17).

Even in exile, the nationalistic dreams were not surrendered. Earlier we saw that the elders of the people in exile came to Ezekiel for advice (14:1; see also 8:1). This happened once again. Apparently the people still had some hope. But in the name of the Lord, Ezekiel indignantly refused to advise the elders.

Covenant history. Just as Stephen gave a sketch of covenant history before the Sanhedrin to prove the guilt of the Jews of his day, so the prophet Ezekiel now holds up a mirror to Israel's apostate past for the benefit of the elders. In many respects there were similarities between the exiles and their fathers, who had served wood and stone, just like the other nations (20:32). Didn't such sin cry out for God's judgment, for His outstretched arm and burning anger?

As in the time of the exodus, there would again be a period in "the wilderness." We read: "As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, says the Lord GOD" (20:36). Israel's Shepherd would let His covenant wrath be felt. The new wilderness, of course, was the land of exile (vs. 33ff).

Variety of expression. Again we read the sentence that resounds throughout Ezekiel's prophecy: "And you shall know that I am the LORD" (vs. 42; see also vs. 38). This sentence however, is here to be viewed as an announcement not of judgment but of grace, for the Lord was to reveal Himself in yet another way. Again there would be a return, an exodus.

For on my holy mountain, the mountain height of Israel, says the Lord GOD, there all the house of Israel, all of them, shall serve me in the land. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my name's sake, not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt doings, O house of Israel, says the Lord GOD (vs. 40, 44).

Perhaps you find all this talk about judgment monotonous. (There's much more to come.) If so, note the *variety* in the prophet's way of expressing himself. Ezekiel's style of preaching is not drab; in a multicolored way, he pronounces judgment on the temple city.

A limit to the misery. As he speaks of the two-pronged attack made on Ammon and Jerusalem, Ezekiel cannot help but sigh about his tidings of misfortune, his lament about the threatening sword of war. The king of Babylon will hesitate. Should he attack Rabbah, the city of the rebellious Ammonites, or should he go on directly to Jerusalem? Using an arrow as his oracle, he decides to go to Jerusalem first. Ammon will get its turn later. Thus Judah's king loses his crown and the city is reduced to ruins. And what could be worse than the disfiguring of the temple city and the house of the princes?

Night has fallen. Yet it is not a darkness without a dawn, for there is a *limit* to the misery. The limit is: ". . . until the *rightful sovereign* comes. Then I will give him all" (21:27

NEB). The Messiah is on the way, the one who will restore David's house to glory.

Ezekiel was able to speak words of judgment only because he knew that God would *never* change His mind about the coming of the Messianic era of salvation. What a comfort for us today! As we ponder this assurance, our attention is drawn to the last part of Ezekiel's prophecy, in which the Messianic promises are spelled out further (ch. 36-48). In the first part of the book, of course, the prophecies of judgment are dominant.

7. Complete Abandonment of the Covenant (22:1—24:27)

A city of blood. Jerusalem is and remains a city of blood. From the highest circles to the lowest, everyone transgresses the rights of the Lord—priests, rulers, the people themselves. Just as Jeremiah once searched for an upright man (Jer. 5:1ff) and could not find one, so Ezekiel sought someone who could “stand in the breach” and turn aside the catastrophe about to descend on the land, but he found no one (22:30). Even the prophets were busy whitewashing the people and predicting a rosy future (vs. 28).

In chapter 23, Samaria and Jerusalem are spoken of as two sisters named Oholah and Oholibah respectively. Oholibah (i.e. Jerusalem) was even more wanton and adulterous in her apostasy from the Lord than her sister Oholah. In a realistic manner, Ezekiel describes how Oholibah conducted herself shamelessly, throwing herself into the arms of her Babylonian and Egyptian lovers and even giving herself to drunkards “from the wilderness” (vs. 42). She would suffer the same judgment as her sister Oholah (i.e. Samaria).

A rusty pot on a great fire. Jerusalem, the city of blood, is like a rusty pot on a great fire (see 11:3). The contents of such a pot will burn. Therefore the inhabitants of Jerusalem should not imagine themselves safe in their city. Fire is the only way to burn away the rust spots, i.e. the *blood guilt*. The city would have to fall (24:1-14).

Ezekiel was to illustrate this in his own life. His wife died, and he was not allowed to mourn her or raise any sort of funeral lament or eat a funeral meal, even though he loved her dearly. She was the “delight of his eyes.” Ezekiel was to be a living sign for his people.

Dry eyes. The stone temple, which was a delight to Israel’s eyes, was about to be desecrated, and the youth all around would fall. The people were to watch silently, with dry eyes—and “know that I am the Lord GOD” (24:24).

This sad message, which was so intensely bound up with Ezekiel’s own lonesome existence, would be his last for a while. The siege of the holy city had begun. Soon a refugee would arrive with news of Jerusalem’s fall. Then the prophet would speak again—this time in words of comfort.

8. The Nations Shall Know That He Is the Lord (25:1—32:32)

Children of Lot. First we read prophecies about seven of the nations around Israel, nations that had caused Israel suffering, nations that may have encouraged Judah in its resistance to Babylon but laughed scornfully when Judah was the first to fall in Babylon’s drive to expand. The old hatred became manifest again.

First of all, there were the “children of Lot,” namely,

Ammon and Moab. What malicious pleasure they had taken in Jerusalem's fall! (25:6, 8). Israel's brother nation of Edom was hungry for vengeance, as were the Philistines. The Lord would stretch out His hand against the neighboring nations to make sure they were aware that He is the LORD. What's left of those nations today?

Tyre and Sidon. And then there was Tyre and the nearby city of Sidon. Three chapters are devoted to them. In the book of Revelation we hear an echo of these prophecies. The Phoenicians who lived in those two cities could perhaps be compared to the Dutch and the English in the days of the search for colonies and the establishment of new global trade patterns. The Phoenicians went everywhere in their ships, establishing colonies throughout the entire Mediterranean world—in Cyprus, Malta, Sicily, Carthage, and even Spain.

We can well understand the intense interest of the Jewish exiles in the unfolding of international affairs. What would become of Tyre and Sidon? The Phoenicians had rejoiced at the fall of Jerusalem, the city that stood in their way. Its fall had opened a new door to free trade. "Aha, the gate of the peoples [i.e. Jerusalem] is broken, it has swung open to me" (26:2). These traders evaluated everything in pragmatic terms, thinking always of the prospects for profit.

Ezekiel now prophesied about them from his position in exile. Tyre, the coastal city, would be overrun by a sea of nations. That would mean the end of Tyre as a city. "Then they will know that I am the LORD" (26:6). Tyre would be washed out in a great flood (26:3ff, 19ff). The world would tremble and lament her fall.

The prophet himself sings laments for her. Read them carefully. Aren't you amazed at his tremendous knowledge of foreign countries? Tyre is a great sea castle, a Titanic that sinks:

Your rowers have brought you out
into the high seas.
The east wind has wrecked you
in the heart of the seas.
Your riches, your wares, your merchandise,
your mariners and your pilots,
your caulkers, your dealers in merchandise,
and all your men of war who are in you,
with all your company
that is in your midst,
sink into the heart of the seas
on the day of your ruin (27:26-7).

The king of Tyre had been placed in a virtual paradise on God's holy mountain. Yet that was not enough for him: he wanted to be like God. This desire cost him his "Garden of Eden": the cherub drove him out (28:11-19).

Sidon would also fall some day. This would not be a normal consequence of the course of events, a regularity of history. No, Yahweh would manifest Himself in judgment as the *Holy One*.

Egypt. Ultimately, the message of judgment on the neighboring nations should be a message of comfort to Israel, which was destined to return from exile one day. "They [i.e. Israel] shall dwell securely, when I execute judgment upon all their neighbors who have treated them with contempt" (28:26).

It's true that Tyre was not captured immediately. Nebuchadnezzar's first attempt to take the city failed (29:17ff). The Lord then gave him Egypt as "recompense" for his labors. This proud land in the Nile delta, this land on which dying Jerusalem had fixed its last hopes, was to be broken.

Pharaoh and his army. Again Ezekiel waxes eloquent and demonstrates a great knowledge of conditions. He

composes a lamentation about Pharaoh (ch. 32). The realm of the dead, which had already swallowed up the great ones of Assyria and Elam and other ancient nations that terrorized their neighbors, will also swallow up Pharaoh and his army (32:16-32).

Remember that all of this was written to provide living comfort for the Lord's people. Over against this field of bones and Jerusalem's destruction stands the valley of dead bones that came to life (ch. 37). The trumpet announcing the death of the Egyptians sounds a note of life and triumph here. Didn't the same thing happen at the time of the exodus? The Lord will again break all earthly power so that the church will believe in the life-giving power of His Word.

9. Ezekiel's Second Calling: Prophet of Salvation (33:1—37:28)

Watchman over Israel. Earlier we saw that Ezekiel stopped prophesying after the siege of Jerusalem began (24:27). But he was not destined to remain silent forever, for God would appoint him anew to serve as watchman over Israel (33:1ff; see also 3:16-21). Deliverance hung on the faithfulness of his testimony. Thus says the Lord!

Now came the bad news of Jerusalem's fall. A refugee arrived in Babylon to inform the Jews that God had carried out His oft repeated threat. The Lord confirmed the words of His prophet: finally the exiles would realize that He is indeed Yahweh.

Now that the Lord had spoken, Ezekiel could speak again (33:21-2). This time, unlike the earlier occasions, people listened. Yet the prophet should not make too much of the fact that they were actually listening, for not all hearers are doers of the Word.

The people took a certain enjoyment in what Ezekiel had to say, but they treated his prophecy like the latest hit song. The Lord said to Ezekiel: “They listen to your words, but no one puts them into practice. When the thing takes place—and it is beginning now—they will learn that there has been a prophet among them” (33:32-3 JB).

The Good Shepherd. The following chapters describe what is “beginning now.” Just as the prophet first sketched a time of misfortune, he now followed the Lord’s orders by using all the colors at his disposal to sketch the time of salvation that God was preparing and would eventually make a reality.

Ezekiel paints a beautiful picture of the Good Shepherd (ch. 34). Israel knows all about the misery of being led by a poor shepherd: the misconduct and neglect of its office-bearers led to the destruction of the flock. The Lord Himself now picks up the shepherd’s staff by giving them a shepherd who would lead them to pasture, namely, “my servant David.”

For His name’s sake. The land is restored in paradisaal fashion. The enemy land of Edom, by contrast, turns into a wilderness (ch. 35). “Then they will know that I am the LORD” (vs. 15).

Thus it is not for Israel’s own sake but for the sake of His name that the Lord plans to restore His people to their former glory. Once more they will be gathered from exile and converted. The Spirit of God will exchange their heart of stone for a heart of flesh. The knowledge of their misery will be paired with an experience of deliverance and the exercise of gratitude (ch. 36).

Isn’t this an unbelievable transformation? Viewed in purely human terms, it is. How could anything come of a dead and desecrated people? There would seem to be no ground for hope.

Dead, dry bones. To answer these questions, the Lord shows the prophet a valley full of dead, dry bones. Were those bones left over from a destructive battle in earlier days? Wasn't Israel just like a field of dead bones?

The Israelites sometimes said: "Our bones are dried up, our hope has gone; we are as good as dead" (37:11 JB). But Ezekiel was not to be satisfied with such defeatist language. In the vision, the Lord commanded him to prophesy against the bones and call the Spirit from all four directions to give them life. It worked. Ezekiel spoke, and the field of bones turned into an enormous, living army.

This vision is an image of Israel's resurrection: there is a rebirth in Israel's future. There is even hope for the tribes of Joseph. The Lord holds the prospect of a Messianic future before His people as the old covenant promise is repeated: I will be their God, and they shall be My people (vs. 37; see also Rev. 21:3).

In the course of history, the vision of the dead, dry bones has often served to illustrate the necessity and possibility of a Spiritual revival. We also think of this prophecy when we read about Christ telling Nicodemus that man must be born again (compare John 3:5 with Ezek. 36:25; and John 3:6, 8 with Ezek. 37:9-10). Ezekiel's vision teaches us in a beautiful way that rebirth is to be sought by way of *the Word and prophecy*. There is no Spirit-led revival outside the Word!

The resurrection of all flesh. As you ponder the fulfillment of these prophecies, you would do well not to limit yourself to thinking in terms of "souls." Time and again we read promises about how the land and the nation will blossom. A "Garden of Eden" will replace the desolate wilderness (36:35; see also 35:14-15).

Don't be so quick to seek a "spiritual meaning" in these promises. For those who believe in the resurrection of all flesh, God's promises concern the restoration of the *entire*

creation. Throughout the prophecies of salvation, we are assured repeatedly that *everything* will turn out well in the end—the relationship between God and His covenant people, the relationship of man to his fellow man, and also the relationship of redeemed man to the creation.

The more you read Biblical prophecies in truly *Spiritual* terms, the *broad*er their import becomes. “This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden.” That’s how the prophet sees the future.

*There was a rallying, once, of
kings, advancing together along a
common front (Ps. 48:4 JB).*

10. A Fierce Attack on the Church (38:1—39:29)

Hostile powers to contend with. This glorious future was not to be reached without difficulties along the way. Before Ezekiel sketches *how* the Lord sanctifies Israel through His holy place and takes up permanent residence in the midst of His people, he points out that there will still be enemies and hostile powers to contend with.

Gog, who comes from the land of Magog, will attack the rebuilt ruins and the nation that dwells “at the center of the earth” (38:12). His mighty attack will be an international project. The enemy will approach with flags flying, bearing abominations and deceit as his weapons in his struggle with the people of God.

Through the Lord’s hand, he will be swept away like chaff: the bodies of Gog’s hosts will fill a valley, and vultures will come from every side to partake of the “sacrificial feast” (39:17ff; see also Rev. 19:17ff). It will take at least seven months before all the corpses are buried

(vs. 12) and seven years before all the weapons have disappeared (vs. 9ff). At the same time, Israel will be revived; there will be a change in the fortunes of Jacob. Gog's end will signal the beginning of a reborn Israel.

Sodom's fate. When we ask about the fulfillment of this prophecy, we must be careful not to be led astray by people who identify Meshech (38:2) with Moscow, or Magog with the Mongols. This interpretation makes *Gog* a representative of *Russia*. Instead we should note that in Israel's own history, there is a period (167-161 B.C.) in which the Maccabees succeeded in smashing the Syrians to the north. (This matter is also dealt with in the prophecy of Daniel.)

Naturally, the struggle of the Maccabees does not exhaust the meaning of this prophecy, which is related in vivid language. The prophecy also shows us that any power that rises up against the church is doomed to fall. The fierce attack on the church made by satan and his followers on the day of the Lord will lead to his final defeat, as he is cast into a lake of fire and brimstone. "Gog and Magog" will suffer the fate of Sodom (see Rev. 20:7-10).

11. The New Jerusalem (40:1—48:35)

A restored temple city. In the book of Revelation, a sketch of the New Jerusalem follows a description of the destruction of Gog and Magog and of the last judgment. We find the same pattern in Ezekiel: the conclusion of the book gives us the plan of a restored temple city. Thus the *end* brings us back to the *beginning*.

We read earlier of Ezekiel's tour of the temple when it was corrupted by heathen influences (ch. 8). The prophet

watched as the Lord *abandoned* the temple complex. Now things have come full circle, as a *new* temple takes the place of the one that was destroyed.

Minute description. The precise measurements of the new temple are given. This temple is not a “second temple.” No, it is a guarantee that the Messianic age has finally come, that the Lord will dwell in the midst of His people forever.

The minute description and architectural detail should not bore you, for what you are reading is symbolic language giving expression to a great promise. “Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place of the soles of my feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the people of Israel for ever” (43:7).

Paradise regained. Ezekiel is then allowed to witness a great event: the glory of the Lord *returns* to His temple (43:1ff). The name of the New Jerusalem is “The LORD is there” (48:35). The promise of the covenant is fulfilled.

Paradise, once lost, is regained. Out of the temple streams a river of life in the direction of the Dead Sea, which is then able to support life again. The curse of Sodom no longer hangs over Israel’s head. Along the banks of the river grow trees of life (see also Rev. 22:1-2; Joel 3:18; Zech. 14:8).

Again, we must resist the impulse to interpret the visions of Ezekiel in an exclusively “spiritual” way. The entire creation radiates God’s glory. From the temple, where God’s throne stands, the river of life flows along its channel (47:1ff; 43:7; Rev. 22:1). “Nature” and “grace” come together in perfect harmony. Try looking at the world in *that* light. One day it will be redeemed!

A broader perspective. Naturally, the images used here have an Old Testament flavor. There is still talk of a

separate priestly service and of offerings of atonement (ch. 43-44). The “prince” still has a specially designated place in the midst of his people.

It should not surprise us that the primary focus is on the time after the exile. Ezekiel was speaking to the exiles of his day; in addressing them, he spoke words of comfort that applied to *their* situation.

For us, as New Testament readers, the perspective is even broader. The book of Revelation takes over various motifs from Ezekiel and works them out. We, too, await the City of God. Yet there is no more talk of a service of atonement. The living Lamb, with the Father, is already seated on the throne. There is no temple in this City, but its absence in no way hinders covenant fellowship: “Its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22).

The preaching of Ezekiel can be a source of comfort to us today. Thanks to Christ, the Priest-King, there is nothing standing in the way of the Lord’s dwelling in the midst of reborn Israel. Henceforth the name of this city will be “The LORD is there” (48:35). And the throne of God and the Lamb will be there, and all His servants will worship (Rev. 22:3).

Daniel

1. Resistance Literature for the Holy War

A book for all times. The book of Daniel includes stories (ch. 1-6) and visions (ch. 7-12). Thus it can be divided into two parts—as long as we do not make the division watertight, for there is a definite connection between the two parts. The entire book of Daniel is animated by a single purpose: it is a piece of “resistance literature,” a weapon in the ancient battle proclaimed in Genesis 3:15.

The book of Daniel was written to be of comfort to the church. It appeals to the church to maintain the antithesis and not to slacken its efforts, regardless of the opposition it encounters.

Daniel is a book for all times. Like every other book of the Bible, it speaks to us in a powerful way today. But if it is to be properly understood, we must take into account the situation for which it was originally intended. That situation is made clear in the book itself, especially in the visions recorded in chapters 8-12.

The “time of the end.” We read that the vision recorded

in chapter 8 bears on the distant future, the “appointed time of the end” (vs. 19). Daniel is to keep the vision a secret; he must “seal it up” (vs. 26). At the end of the book Daniel is told: “Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end” (12:9; see also 8:17).

Thus the *visions* of the book of Daniel are intended for the “time of the end.” For a long time, the first person dreams recorded by Daniel were kept secret. When they were finally published in “the last days,” they helped greatly in the church’s resistance.

Antiochus Epiphanes. How could anyone be certain that the “time of the end” had come, that it was really time to make Daniel’s testament public? In 7:25 we read about a king who speaks against the Most High and wears down His saints. Around the Mediterranean Sea there were four great empires (the four beasts) at the same time. This king was the horn that had eyes and a mouth full of boasts, the one that arose from the fourth beast, making war on the saints and overcoming them (7:20-1).

For people who lived during the “time of the end,” it was clear that Daniel must have been referring to the king known as Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus is also mentioned in the apocryphal books of the Maccabees. He ruled in Syria over part of the former empire of Alexander the Great (175-164 B.C.). Antiochus tried to persuade the Jews to adopt Greek culture and even used violence. He had the temple dedicated to Zeus. For those who wanted to remain faithful to the Lord, it was a time of severe persecution, as we read in I Maccabees:

Now on the fifteenth day of Chislev, in the one hundred and forty-fifth year, they erected a desolating sacrilege upon the altar of burnt offering. They also built altars in the surrounding cities of Judah, and burned

incense at the doors of the houses and in the streets. The books of the law which they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. Where the book of the covenant was found in the possession of any one, or if any one adhered to the law, the decree of the king condemned him to death. They kept using violence against Israel, against those found month after month in the cities. And on the twenty-fifth day of the month they offered sacrifice on the altar which was upon the altar of burnt offering. According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung the infants from their mothers' necks.

But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die. And very great wrath came upon Israel (1:54-64).

Antiochus unleashed an “anti-Christian” terror in the land, for he was dead set against anything Biblical. The temple was converted into its opposite, that is, into a house of idolatry. There were many Jews who forsook the holy covenant (Dan. 11:30). During this time of crisis, when the church was in danger of going under, the secret visions of Daniel, joined to the other parts of the book, made their impact.

Persevering to the end. Clearly this book had an enormous influence in the days when the idolatrous powers triumphed and many of the covenant people became unfaithful, days when there was nothing but affliction and temptation facing God's people. This is apparent from the quotation from I Maccabees: the reference to the “desolating sacrilege” and “holy covenant” are quotations from Daniel (see 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).

The book of Daniel has helped in continuing the ancient

struggle. It shows us that there was oppression in ancient times, as well as idolatry and compulsory participation in heathen worship activities. Just as the believers persevered then (while many of God's people gave in) they will have to hold out now and in the future. Those who succeed in persevering to the end will be saved.

Apparent defeat. The persecution does not escape God's attention. Hundreds of years in advance, Daniel recognized that the proud boasts come from a power opposed to God. At the same time, he saw the *judgment* to which this power would be subjected. He witnessed the apparent defeat of the church, but also its ultimate triumph.

This "Revelation to Daniel," this "book of the martyrs," has been of great comfort to the church in times when the voices of the prophets were no longer heard. Yet we should not suppose that the book's application is restricted to the Persian and Maccabean eras of resistance against tyranny and attacks on the church. Daniel is also quoted at various points in the New Testament, especially in sections dealing with the future.

Expressions like *Son of man* and *tribulation* go back to Daniel. The characterization of the enemy as a "beast" in the book of Revelation makes a great deal of sense to anyone familiar with the book of Daniel. Before His death on the cross, Christ pointed explicitly to the book of Daniel when He talked about the "desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel" (Matt. 24:15).

A second fulfillment. This Old Testament reference on Christ's part gives today's church an important lesson in how to interpret this Old Testament "book of Revelation," for Christ foresaw that Daniel's prophecy would be "fulfilled" anew. It was fulfilled not by any Gentile power like the Roman empire but by *the Jews themselves*, who turned the temple into a bulwark of zealotry

and idolatry, thereby introducing a “desolating sacrilege.”

The prophecy was fulfilled, then, by the apostate church, which ran after false prophets and messiahs after crucifying the true Prophet and King. It is this church that is governed by the “beast.” In the Revelation to John, Jesus worked out this motif further.

Daniel need not remain a closed book. It is an abiding warning to the church never to compromise—better to die than be defiled. There is one word that has no place in the church’s vocabulary—*capitulation*. Only through the Son of man, Jesus Christ, who reserves the kingship for the saints He has called, can we persevere to the bitter end, relying not on our own strength but solely on grace.

Jewish apocalypses. In characterizing the book of Daniel as “resistance literature for the holy war,” we must not place it in the same category as the resistance literature of the Jewish apocalypses. The Jewish apocalyptic writers favored armed rebellion against the Romans in a spirit of zealotry; they fixed their hopes on the efforts of man. Thus they were ultimately revolutionary in nature.

In both the historical section of the book of Daniel and the visions that make up the second half, we find a continuing appeal for *covenantal* resistance, a resistance that looks to the Lord in all things. The stone that smashed the image was not cut free by any human hand (2:34, 45). The king who opposes the Ruler of rulers will be destroyed *without* the intervention of human hands (8:25).

A faithful official. The differences between the book of Daniel and the later Jewish resistance literature come to the fore clearly when we observe how Daniel is depicted, namely, as a faithful official of the Persian and Babylonian empires. He and his three friends are scrupulous in their observance of the law of the Lord, but for the rest they devote themselves wholeheartedly to their

work in government and never engage in sabotage (2:49; 3:30; 6:4, 28). Other texts that are significant in this context are Jeremiah 27, where Nebuchadnezzar is called the servant of Yahweh, and Isaiah 45:1, where Cyrus is described as Yahweh's "anointed." What we read about Daniel and his attitude toward the governmental authorities fits in very well with Romans 13:1-7. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities"

The book of Daniel, with its historical chapters followed by visions, is reminiscent of the book of Revelation, which begins with the "letters" to the churches and then goes on to present visions in which the message of the first part of the book is explicated. Both these books have been used at times as revolutionary ammunition, but both proceed ultimately from the same principle: there is no authority except from God. Both are antithetical to any revolutionary apocalyptic approach. These two books provide no building blocks for a "theology of revolution."

2. Seek First the Kingdom of Heaven

Young princes. The book of Daniel begins by telling us something about the initial capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. As you know, Jerusalem later rebelled twice. The second time it was captured (597 B.C.), it had to pay the price for rebelling, and the third time it was totally destroyed (586).

The first time the city was taken (approximately 605), the vessels used in the temple were sent to Babylon. Some young princes were deported to the Babylonian court at the same time, to be trained for service in the empire. The ancient line of David, which had been promised world dominion, now had to work for the glory of the

Babylonian empire with its global pretensions. It appeared that the Lord had forgotten His promises.

Dietary requirements. The wide-ranging training program which the Jewish boys underwent naturally conflicted with some of the Mosaic laws by which they were supposed to live. There was nothing to stop the young Jews from thinking whatever they wanted about the Babylonian literature they were forced to read, but when it came to foods prepared in an idolatrous manner, they could not hide their convictions. Therefore Daniel and his three friends asked for an exemption from the dietary requirements.

They were granted an exemption for a trial period, after which their health and appearance was even better than that of the other young men in the program who had eaten the prescribed food. They were not put to shame because of the faith that made them persevere.

Their refusal to break the dietary regulations was respected. Once their education was completed, they came to be highly thought of by the king because of their wisdom. The “application” for the first readers and for us is clear: *stand firm* in your faith and don’t accommodate yourself to “Babylon.”

The world’s wisdom put to shame. Babylon was the supreme power on earth. The presence at the court of Daniel and his three friends testified to this. In a dream of Nebuchadnezzar, it was made clear that one day there would come an end to the great world empires. Then the promised kingdom of Israel would rise again.

The wise men at the court of Nebuchadnezzar could not tell him what he had dreamed. Daniel, however, could—and thereby put the world’s wisdom to shame. (We are reminded of Joseph at the court of Pharaoh.)

A colossal statue. In Nebuchadnezzar's dream, it was shown how worldly power eventually collapses. The king saw a gigantic statue. The head was of gold and represented his own kingdom. But as he looked down, the gold made way for silver, which in turn yielded to bronze, while the legs and feet were made of iron and clay. The empires that would come after the Babylonian empire (i.e. the empire of the Medes, the Persian empire, and the Greek-Macedonian empire of Alexander the Great and his successors) would each be less impressive than the one before. The colossal statue did not stand on strong legs.

A stone "cut out by no human hand" (2:34, 45) came rolling down the mountain and smashed the statue. It became a great mountain that filled the entire earth.

We hardly need to ask what this huge stone represents. The book of Daniel tells us clearly that it symbolizes the *kingship of God*, which abides forever and does not yield to any government or empire. This passage prophesies about *Christ*, the Stone who smashes all His enemies, who is also the Rock and foundation of the church's temple.

Whereas many want to establish the Kingdom of God through their own activities, or through the sword, or through good works, we read here that God's Kingdom *makes use* of us but is not *dependent* on us. The stone that smashed the statue was *not cut out by human hands*. Christ's Kingdom is not "of" this world, but it is coming anyway. At the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's rule, when Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed and the misery of mass deportation was still ahead, the Lord already revealed the coming restoration of His kingly power.

The angel in the furnace. Great honors were bestowed on Daniel for interpreting the dream. His three friends were given high government positions as well. But this led to a situation where the three had to stand up for their faith in an unmistakable way.

On the plain of Dura, Nebuchadnezzar had a huge statue built, which not only had a golden head but was completely covered with gold. A mass meeting was organized, and all the high officials were asked to attend. At a certain signal from a gigantic orchestra, all present had to bow down before this 30-meter-high symbol of blind state power.

The three friends stubbornly refused to offend Yahweh by bowing down. They knew they might be required to seal their confession by dying in the flames. Note that the three were not counting on a miraculous deliverance, although they did not rule it out (3:17-18).

There was a miracle, as we all know: an angel joined them in the furnace to preserve them from the flames. Not a hair on their heads was singed. Even Nebuchadnezzar had to admit that God had sent His angel to rescue His servants (3:28; see also Acts 12:11).

The first commandment. I'm sure you can understand what comfort this story offered the Jews in the Persian era of Jewish history and later as well. The Jews lived under the control of idolatrous rulers and had to cooperate with them to some extent. The book of Daniel showed that this could be done—provided one did not let go of the “principles of Scripture.” During the time of Syrian tyranny, when Israel was subjected to severe oppression, this story illustrated and emphasized the importance of the first commandment.

The church must see to it that she never loses the proper perspective. The next chapter of Daniel, which includes a proclamation issued by Nebuchadnezzar, shows just how relative the power of any king is. Only the Almighty possesses absolute power! Therefore He must be respected above any other power. In our time of superpowers in East and West, this message is highly relevant.

He is the living God, enduring for ever (6:26).

3. Demonstrations of the Lord's Power

A gigantic tree. On monuments Nebuchadnezzar sometimes compared his empire to a colossal tree giving shade to all the nations. In one of his dreams, he saw such a tree. Here we see again that God speaks to people in their own language. (Think of Pharaoh's dream!)

It was decided by a council of the gods that the gigantic tree seen by the king of Babylon in his dream was to be cut down. As for Nebuchadnezzar, he was to be given the heart and mind of an animal until "seven times pass over him."

Daniel interpreted this dream as a warning addressed to the king. Nebuchadnezzar ignored the warning and had to pay a heavy price for his pride—temporary insanity.

The king's proclamation. We should note that Daniel 4 contains a proclamation in the form of a letter, which Nebuchadnezzar issued after he was healed. The glorious "application" of this story comes at the end of the proclamation:

His *sovereignty* is never-ending
and his *rule* endures through all generations;
all dwellers upon earth count for nothing
and he deals as he wishes with the host of heaven;
no one may lay hand upon him
and ask him what he does (4:34-5 NEB).

Jewish scribes in the king's employ, who helped prepare this proclamation, apparently managed to work in some expressions borrowed from the prophecy of Isaiah (see Is. 40:17, 26; 45:9). In the background we hear the trium-

phant strains of the song of Moses: “The LORD will *reign* for ever and ever” (Ex. 15:18).

The writing on the wall. In chapter 5 we are given another glimpse of what Yahweh’s kingship means. When the regent Belshazzar, a son of Nebuchadnezzar and also one of his successors, misuses the vessels from the temple at a profane drinking party, writing mysteriously appears on the wall. The inscription was puzzling, for it could conceivably be read as meaning *one mina* (i.e. a unit of weight approximately equal to a kilogram), *shekel* (equals one sixth of a mina), $\frac{1}{2}$ *mina*. Daniel, using different vowels with the consonants, read the inscription as follows: “MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and *Persians*” (5:26-7).

We are then informed: “That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain” (vs. 30). It almost sounds as though he died in a palace revolution. Other interpreters assume that he died in an attack by the Persians, who seized the empire at that time. God, whose temple lay in ruins, had given a demonstration of His majesty.

Windows open facing Jerusalem. When the Babylonian empire made way for the rule of the Medes under Darius, the Lord gave another demonstration. Daniel was faithful in praying at the appointed times, keeping his windows open facing Jerusalem. Some jealous colleagues brought accusations against him during a certain month in which prayers were to be addressed only to the king of the realm. By praying to his God, Daniel was transgressing a law intended to promote the unity of the empire. This meant that he was subject to the death penalty decreed for anyone who disobeyed the king’s command in this matter.

Here we are given another demonstration of the

kingship of the living God: when Daniel is thrown to the lions, their mouths are closed and he is not harmed. Even King Darius is forced to sing the song of God's eternal dominion when he sees what has happened! (6:27).

Precious in God's sight. In the New Testament we hear echoes of this event. In Hebrews, for example, we read about prophets "who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire" (11:33-4). Paul proclaims: "But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the message fully, that all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom" (II Tim. 4:17-18; see also Ps. 22:22).

In Christ, to whom is given all power in heaven and on earth, the prayer of the church is heard: save me from the mouth of the lion raging against me (Ps. 22:12ff). God's rule will endure "to the end" (6:26). Jesus said to His disciples: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20; see also vs. 18). If the children of the Kingdom are threatened by both force and cunning—and we saw what this means in the book of Daniel—they may draw comfort from the awareness that their sorrow, tears and suffering to maintain the true worship are precious in God's sight, especially when extreme measures are taken against them.

4. The Son of Man Ascends His Throne

Everlasting dominion. When the Lord Jesus appeared before the high priest Caiaphas, He confirmed that He was the Messiah. Addressing Himself to this Jewish pope and his henchman, He added: "But I tell you, hereafter you

will see the *Son of man* seated at the right hand of Power, and *coming on the clouds of heaven* (Matt. 26:64).

These words must be read against the background of the vision in Daniel 7, the vision of the four “animals” or beasts or monsters (think of the four horns in 8:8) or demonic powers. The fourth beast is the most horrible of all: it has a horn with eyes and a mouth full of proud boasts.

The Most High God appears on His throne, as “the court” sits in judgment. Myriads of angels stand before Him. Apparently the last of the beasts is being judged, for it is then destroyed. The power of the other beasts is limited. At the same time, someone “like a son of man” appears on the clouds of heaven. He is given everlasting dominion over the entire earth (7:14). He does not descend to the earth on the clouds but seats Himself on God’s throne.

We must be sure to think of this vision whenever we read about the “Son of man” in the New Testament. Christ confessed before the Sanhedrin that He was the Son of man mentioned in Daniel 7. Therefore He would have to be crucified and lifted up, like the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14; Matt. 27:2, 22). After that He would be enthroned.

Through suffering to glory. This declaration was exceptionally offensive to the Jews. When they thought of the vision of Daniel, they visualized imminent glory, a shining breakthrough by the Kingdom of God. But Christ clung to the law—through suffering to glory. Through much oppression we will enter the Kingdom of God. If we suffer with Him, we will rule with Him. Like King, like people!

It should come as no surprise that Christ applies the term *Son of man* to Himself, whereas in the book of Daniel this expression is bound up with “the saints of the Most High” (7:18, 27). Can the people be separated from

their King? Of course not—neither in suffering nor in glory.

The Son of man walks between the seven lampstands (i.e. churches) as the Ruler of the kings of the earth (Rev. 1:5, 12ff) and makes His chosen ones kings to rule forever with Him (Rev. 22:5). The sea, that primordial power hostile to God, may disgorge monsters while the saints appear to suffer a complete defeat (7:21; Rev. 13:7), but the heavenly tribunal will decide in favor of the saints of the Most High (7:22; see also Rev. 20:4, which is regularly mistranslated and has roughly the same meaning as this text from Daniel).

*Do not lift up your horn on high
(Ps. 75:5).*

5. A Time of Oppression

Antiochus Epiphanes. Another vision, which Daniel had while in the city of Susa (see Esther 1:2), gives further details. A ram from the east charged westward, northward and southward—the power of the Persians. Then came a he-goat from the west with a striking horn between its eyes—Alexander the Great. Although the ram was defeated, the great horn of the he-goat broke off. Four horns arose to replace it. (Alexander’s empire was divided into four parts after his death.)

From one of the four came a horn that grew very great and attacked the “glorious land” (i.e. Israel), even going so far as to take away the continual burnt offering and the temple sanctuary (8:9, 11). This last horn represented Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who introduced a false worship in place of the daily sacrifice and trampled the “host of stars” (i.e. the church’s teachers) underfoot.

Thus there was to be a time of oppression. But Daniel was assured that this horrible period would be *limited*. The “horn” would be destroyed, but “by no human hand” (8:25). After 2300 evenings and mornings (i.e. 1150 days), Antiochus would no longer be able to keep the sanctuary from being used for true worship, nor would he trample on the saints of the Most High (8:14). The sanctuary would again be restored.

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God’s own choosing.

Daniel’s prayer. Jeremiah prophesied that once 70 years had gone by in Babylon, the Lord would consider the plight of His people and bring them back to their own land (Jer. 29:10; see also 25:12-13). Daniel knew about that prophecy. When the Babylonian empire was attacked by the powerful Medes, he prayed to the Lord for a fulfillment of the promise (ch. 9).

He prayed a moving prayer in which he confessed the sins of his people while appealing continually to God’s covenant faithfulness:

And now, O Lord our God, who didst bring thy people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand, and hast made thee a name, as at this day, we have sinned, we have done wickedly. We do not present our supplications before thee on the ground of our righteousness, but on the ground of thy great mercy. O LORD, hear; O LORD, forgive; O LORD, give heed and act; delay not, for thy own sake, O my God, because thy city and thy people are called by thy name (9:15, 18-19).

Seventy weeks. While Daniel was praying, the archangel

Gabriel, who had already appeared in the previous vision, came to tell him that his petition had been heard. He spoke of 70 weeks (or 70 weeks of years). Thus a much longer period than “70 years” lay ahead of Daniel.

Jerusalem would indeed be rebuilt and the services in the temple restored, but the return from exile would not immediately bring back the old glory. The rebuilt temple would stand for more than four centuries, until another “troubled time” (9:24-5). After 62 weeks of years had passed, there would be a crisis. The high priest (the anointed one) would be killed, the temple services overthrown, and the daily sacrifice halted.

Multiple fulfillments. Isaiah had already prophesied about such a destruction, which had been firmly decided on in advance (Is. 10:22-3; see also Rom. 9:27-8). What Isaiah foretold had come true already. Now Gabriel was letting Daniel know that the Lord would *again* let a destroyer loose on His people. The second destroyer referred to must be *Antiochus Epiphanes*.

This shows us that according to the Old Testament, more than one fulfillment of a specific prophecy is possible. It should not surprise us, therefore, that Christ applies Daniel’s words to a coming third destruction of Jerusalem which was to take place not long after His own time on earth.

In the light of Christ’s work on earth, the words of Gabriel take on a new meaning: He atones *definitively* for all unrighteousness. It is Christ who finally brings the misery of exile to an end. He does this by being “cut off” Himself, as the Anointed One, even though He has done no wrong (9:24, 26).

Because His own people are the ones who kill Him and do not recognize Him, Jerusalem will be turned into rubble. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have

gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Matt. 23:37).

Not a political almanac. There are people who like to speculate about the future on the basis of the numbers to be found in such books as Daniel and Revelation (which is similar to Daniel in many ways). They try to uncover a “hidden” meaning that would be applicable to the current political scene. But such an approach draws our attention away from what Scripture *intends* to teach.

We try to apply the prophecies to events in our time, which do indeed bear some resemblance to what Daniel was talking about, and that’s what makes Daniel so interesting. What we forget is that the Bible is not a political almanac; it is a proclamation of the gospel.

The Jews in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes received strength from the prophecies in the book of Daniel so that they could stand firm—also in the face of their apostate countrymen—in the knowledge that God would keep His promises. No matter how dark things may have looked, they knew God would work out His purposes.

The comfort provided by those prophecies of Daniel first made public during the days of Antiochus Epiphanes is also intended for us. Nothing can hold back the coming of God’s Kingdom. A remnant will repent and turn to God. Even in the last of the “70 weeks,” the Lord will be near His people (9:27). After the last judgment (the fourth judgment) will dawn the morning in which the church’s exile finally comes to an end.

Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book (Rev. 22:10).

6. A Call for Endurance and Faith

Three weeks of mourning. Daniel knew what it means to pray. Despite his loyal cooperation with the Persian court, he was first and foremost a member of the church. When he discovered that the repatriated Jews from Babylon were encountering opposition in their homeland, he mourned for three weeks. After that a heavenly figure clothed in linen appeared to him on the banks of the Tigris River (one of the rivers mentioned in connection with Paradise). Was it the angel of Yahweh?

The heavenly figure revealed that he had spent the three weeks of Daniel's mourning fighting against the "prince of the kingdom of Persia" (apparently an evil spirit who stirred up opposition to the Jews in Persia). In the struggle he was helped by the archangel Michael and thus managed to win the victory. This meant that the reconstruction of the city and the temple would proceed despite the opposition of the Samaritans, but it did not mean that all the suffering was over.

A battle in the air. The heavenly servant was now sent to struggle with another "prince" (demon), namely, the "prince of Greece" (10:20). Greece would replace Persia as the ruler of the world. In the realm of the angels there would then be another struggle, this time against the Greek demons. Michael would take part in this struggle (see Rev. 12:7).

Behind the drama of soldiers and diplomats, then, a battle was being fought in the air between angels and devils (see Judges 5:20). At the same time, we are shown the

potential power of *prayer* on the home front (see Eph. 6:10ff, 18ff).

The dream of unity. The purpose of this revelation was to help the church prepare for the battle. The time of oppression was not to come upon the church unexpectedly (see I Pet. 4:12). The heavenly messenger informed Daniel about what was written in the book of truth, that is, what God had in mind (10:21).

The Greek spirit brought into Israel by the Syrian rulers would prove much more dangerous than the fads introduced by the Persians. Humanism would unleash on the church the dream of unity that still holds so many people captive—one empire, one religion, one world, one church.

The precise characterization of future political developments in chapter 11 must be read in this context. Through this revelation, the church would realize that *nothing happens accidentally*. This development of the forces of unrighteousness is all part of God's plan. Israel had to be freed of the illusion that things would get better and better, that a brave new world would be born. The danger signal would have to be given. Be on guard!

The "king of the north." After the Persian kings would come a "mighty king" (11:3). We recognize him as the horn of the he-goat in chapter 8, namely, Alexander the Great. After his death at an early age, Alexander's empire is divided between four generals. Part of it falls to the "king of the north," i.e. the Syrian empire of the Seleucids, and another part to the "king of the south," i.e. the Egyptian empire of the Ptolemies.

A war erupts between the north and the south. As the battle lines shift, Israel is trapped in between and becomes a battlefield. Finally the "glorious land" falls under the firm control of the kings of the north (11:16).

A "contemptible person" becomes king in the north.

Like his predecessors, he undertakes military campaigns against Egypt—three of them (11:25-9, 40ff). His expeditions bring him into Israel's territory, where he takes a firm stand against Israel's worship.

After the first expedition, the king is dead set against the holy covenant (vs. 28). After the second expedition, he takes action in Israel and vents his frustration on the Lord's temple, with the help of his soldiers and some apostate Jews (vs. 30ff). The result is that there is a *crisis among the people*. There are some who fall through flatteries, but there are others who stand firm and do not embark on the path of apostasy. The faithful ones pay the price—suffering and oppression.

A “little help” appears on the scene, and many hypocrites turn to it (vs. 32-4). This “little help” is probably a reference to the resistance of the Maccabees, who aroused a lot of nationalistic fervor in the Jews but, unfortunately, lost their religious zeal more and more, according to the Scriptures. There would be some sifting among “those who are wise.”

Destroyed by God's breath. This northern king gives special honor to the “god of fortresses” (i.e. Zeus, of Mount Olympus) and neglects the other gods (e.g. Tammuz, the “darling” of the women). He speaks “astonishing things” against the God of gods, the God of Israel. (Didn't Antiochus Epiphanes dedicate the temple at Jerusalem to his favorite god, Zeus? See also II Thessalonians 2:4.)

The end comes suddenly for this oppressor: he is destroyed by God's breath (11:45). When this is told, it appears as though everything has changed: the “time of the end” has come (vs. 40). But here the careful description of future historical events breaks off.

The people are plunged into great fear. The angel Michael intervenes, and those whose names are written in

the book of life are saved. Yes, the power of death is broken—for some to eternal life, for others to eternal perdition. Those who are wise, that is, those who are obedient to the Word, can shine again as stars (12:1-3; see also 8:10).

Daniel was commanded to seal this vision until the time of the end, a period that would last a time, two times and half a time (12:7; see also Rev. 12:14). While we read of 1150 days in 8:14, the figure 1290 days is now mentioned. Those who manage to hold out for 1335 days are praised. In other words, those who persevere to the bitter end will be saved. Those who are holy will purify themselves even more (12:10; see also Rev. 22:11).

The “last days.” John was commanded *not* to seal up his revelation, for the time of fulfillment was near. Daniel, however, was to seal up his “book of revelation,” for only in the last days would the last part of his book become fully relevant. It has since been made public, for those “last days” have come.

Together with the earlier chapters of his book, the final chapters speak clear language addressed to the church in a new day. The church knows that the kingship of God mentioned so often in Daniel has come in Jesus Christ. Yet, the time of complete fulfillment has not yet arrived. The Lord is purifying His chosen ones through a great deal of oppression. “Blessed is he who waits” (12:12).

Calvin concluded his treatment of the book of Daniel with the following prayer:

Grant, Almighty God, since thou proposest to us no other end than that of constant warfare during our whole life, and subjectest us to many cares until we arrive at the goal of this temporary racecourse: Grant, I pray thee, that we may never grow fatigued. May we ever be armed and equipped for battle, and whatever the trials by which

thou dost prove us, may we never be found deficient.
May we always aspire towards heaven with upright souls,
and strive with all our endeavours to attain that blessed
rest which is laid up for us in heaven, in Jesus Christ our
Lord. —Amen.

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