

Isaiah 8:11-22  
Divine Counsel for a Difficult Ministry  
by Grover Gunn  
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church  
Jackson, TN

It is very trying to be a voice in the wilderness. It is psychologically difficult to be a minister who believes strongly in God's message and who pours his heart into his work and who greatly desires to see the fruit of his labor, and yet at the same time to be a minister whom very few people listen to or follow. This is sometimes the experience of a missionary to a culture long dominated by some false religion such as Islam. This is sometimes the experience of a missionary to a culture which has abandoned Christianity for secularism, such as much of modern Europe. Sometimes a minister faithfully ministers in such a setting for year after year after year and sees at most a handful profess faith in the gospel. That can be very discouraging.

God had called Isaiah to such a ministry. God had told Isaiah at the time of his call as a prophet,

Isaiah 6:9-10

- 9 ... "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'
- 10 "Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed."

God sent Isaiah to a ministry where few would listen to him or understand his message or respond to his message. In our passage for today, God gives Isaiah some counsel for this difficult ministry. God tells Isaiah what he must do if he is to persevere, if he is to keep his hand to the plow, if he is to be faithful to the end.

We need to listen to this divine counsel ourselves. Our ministry may not be as hard as that of Isaiah. The soil in the garden where God has put us may not be as hard and rocky as the soil assigned to Isaiah. Nevertheless we can at times get discouraged and even begin to question if our work is really worth the effort we are having to put into it to keep it going. At such times, we should listen to the counsel which God gave to Isaiah, and we should apply it to our own situation. We will today look at the infallible counsel under three headings: fear God, be faithful, and forsake falsehood.

Our first point is **Fear God**, and that is our heading for verses 11-15. Verse eleven introduces this section in a way which shows the importance of this divine counsel given to Isaiah. We read that God put His strong hand upon Isaiah. The inspired prophet was always carried along infallibly by the Holy Spirit like a boat carried along by the sea breeze, but sometimes that divine Wind was more powerful than at other times. This language about God's strong hand coming upon Isaiah indicates that God at this point came upon Isaiah with unusual power, with a spiritual force beyond what prophets normally experienced. This is a measure of the importance of this message. All Scripture is inspired of God and profitable, but

some infallible messages are more vital than others. God powerfully seized Isaiah to warn him that he was going to have to go against the flow. God was warning Isaiah that he must not walk in the way of his rebellious countrymen. He is not to be conformed to the world. He is to walk no longer as the rest walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God. Isaiah is going to have to be different. Being different can result in social rejection and ridicule, and those are socially painful experiences. God tells Isaiah that he mustn't fear going against the crowd and being in the minority if that is the price the prophet must pay to be faithful to God. He must instead fear God.

Isaiah's calling was to preach against King Ahaz's looking to the pagan king of Assyria for help instead of looking to the living and true God for help. Some people would respond to Isaiah's message by charging that the prophet must be involved in some political conspiracy to overthrow the government, that the prophet must be some form of political traitor. That, of course, was not the case at all. Isaiah was no foreign agent conspiring against Judah. Isaiah was an ambassador sent from God to challenge the nation to do what was morally right. And doing what was morally right was what was truly best for the nation of Judah in every sense. Yet when a minister's message from God conflicts with the policies of the powerful and calls them into question, that is when there are threats and persecution against the church.

God tells the prophet not to be afraid of mere human threats. God tells the prophet instead to fear God. Jesus said,

Matthew 10:28

28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

In the book of Revelation, the beast is a godless government which demands that people reject God and give the government their total allegiance. The beast of Revelation threatens to persecute those who do not bow down before it. Yet an angel from heaven cries out that those who worship the beast will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, and the smoke of their torment will ascend forever. When you compare the two, the wrath of the beast and the wrath of God, there really is no comparison. Those who fear God are freed from the fear of human threats and persecutions.

In the book of Isaiah, God is often called the Holy One of Israel. When Isaiah had his vision of God's throne room, he heard the Seraphim crying out constantly before God, "Holy, holy, holy." God is the holy One, the unique One who is in a category all to Himself. God tells Isaiah to hallow the Lord, to sanctify the Lord. To hallow or sanctify the Lord is to recognize and acknowledge that God is indeed the uniquely Holy One and thus to give God the respect that is due Him.

The word here translated "hallow" or "sanctify" is related to the word translated "holy" and to the word translated "sanctuary." God tells Isaiah that if he will sanctify God, then God will be to Isaiah a sanctuary. "Sanctify Me, and I will be to you a sanctuary."

The word translated “sanctuary” means a holy place. It often referred to the tabernacle or the temple, that religiously holy place where God dwelt in the midst of His people. That was the primary meaning of the word, but it also was a metaphor for a place of asylum and refuge, and that is what it means here.

The brass altar before the temple where sacrifices were burned was popularly regarded in ancient Israel as a place of asylum. We have an example in 1 Kings chapter 1:

1 Kings 1:50-51

50 Now Adonijah was afraid of Solomon; so he arose, and went and took hold of the horns of the altar.

51 And it was told Solomon, saying, "Indeed Adonijah is afraid of King Solomon; for look, he has taken hold of the horns of the altar, saying, 'Let King Solomon swear to me today that he will not put his servant to death with the sword.'"

As we see here, the brass altar before the temple was popularly regarded as a place of asylum. Yet the temple altar was not an absolutely effective place of asylum. In the very next chapter, 1 Kings chapter 2, Joab was executed clinging to the horns of the same altar.

In contrast, God says that He is an absolutely effective place of refuge. God will surround those who sanctify Him like temple walls.

Psalm 27:4-6

- 4 One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple.
- 5 For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle he shall hide me; he shall set me high upon a rock.
- 6 And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me; therefore I will offer sacrifices of joy in His tabernacle; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD.

So the sanctuary, the temple in Jerusalem, was a metaphor for a place of refuge and asylum in a time of trouble. This does not mean that the people of God will never experience the common miseries of this life, nor does it mean that they are safe from all persecution. In fact, persecution for God's sake is viewed as a privilege. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount said,

Matthew 5:11-12

- 11 Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.
- 12 Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Having God as your sanctuary doesn't mean that you will never be sick, nor that you will never be persecuted for the faith. Yet God seals His people against His own wrath, and they are assured that nothing, neither tribulation nor distress nor persecution, shall be able to separate them from the love of God

in Christ. That is what it means to have God as our sanctuary. When we cling to the horns of the altar in the sense of trusting in the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross as the payment for our sins, we are at peace with God. We know that God will not pour out His wrath upon us for our sins because He has already poured out that wrath upon Jesus in our place.

For those who sanctify the Lord, God is a tried and true Stone, a foundation upon which to build one's life. But for those who do not fear the Lord and who thus rebel against Him, God becomes a stumbling stone. Those who do not build upon the divine Rock trip upon it and fall and are broken. This was the fate of the majority in both the nation Israel to the north and the nation Judah to the south when God sent the Assyrians against them in historical judgment.

Our passage says that God will be to unbelieving Judah a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense, a trap and a snare. The word here translated "snare" is also used in Proverbs 29:25, which says appropriately,

25 The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe.

Our first point was "Fear God." If we fear God, He will be to us a sanctuary. If we don't, He will be to us a stone of stumbling. Our second point is "**Be Faithful**," and this is our heading for verses 16-18. Let's read those verses:

16 Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples.

- 17 And I will wait on the LORD, who hides His face from the house of Jacob; and I will hope in Him.
- 18 Here am I and the children whom the LORD has given me! We are for signs and wonders in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells in Mount Zion.

We can see how these verses can apply to Isaiah and his disciples and his two children. Isaiah is ministering in a time when few listen to his message and few follow him as his disciples. Isaiah is praying that God will tie and bind the inspired message, the truth of God, securely to those who are the prophet's disciples, and that God will seal it safely in the lock box of their heart. This is a prayer that God will enable Isaiah's disciples to persevere and that God will protect them from stumbling. This is a prayer that God will enable Isaiah's disciples to be faithful in those hard times in which Isaiah was ministering.

Isaiah then commits himself to be faithful and to wait patiently with hope for the passing of these spiritually difficult times when God is hiding His face from Judah and not looking upon them with blessing.

Finally Isaiah acknowledges that God has made him and his two sons signs and wonders in Israel. As signs, these three were pledges of God's redemptive plan. This is reflected in their names. Isaiah's name meant that there is salvation only in the Lord. The name of the older son meant that God would not completely destroy the nation of Judah but would preserve a remnant to return first to God and then to Jerusalem. The name

of the younger son meant that God would quickly destroy first the enemies which Judah feared and then Judah herself as an act of judgment. As wonders, these three individuals were tokens of these coming manifestations of God's power. By their very presence in Judah as faithful disciples, they had an opportunity to bear silent witness to God.

I think these three verses do in this way refer to Isaiah and his disciples and his two sons. But we know that these three verses also have a deeper meaning. We know this because the New Testament tells us so. In Hebrews chapter two, the author of Hebrews states that the Son of God became a man and brought many sons to glory. The author of Hebrews quotes three Old Testament passages as proof texts, and the third proof text is from Isaiah 8:18: "Here am I and the children whom God has given Me." The author of Hebrews applies these words to Jesus and His disciples, His spiritual children. Jesus is the ultimate faithful one, and Jesus is the one who enables His disciples to be faithful.

In these three verses, Isaiah, who ministered through the Holy Spirit who is also called the Spirit of Christ, was a type of Christ. In this typological sense, these three verses refer to Christ and His disciples through the ages. In the typological use of this verse, Jesus' disciples are referred to as His children. Jesus is in a sense the father of His people. Jesus is not God the Father. Within the fellowship of the Godhead, there is God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit. In regard to the triune fellowship of the Godhead, Jesus is not the one called the Father. But Jesus is a father figure when it comes to the children

of God among humanity. Just as all humanity are the children of the first Adam, so all of the elect are the children of the second Adam in a spiritual sense, for Jesus is the source of their spiritual life. For as many as receive Jesus, He gives the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name. In this sense, Jesus is in this verse referred to as one who has children.

The message found in these three verses in Isaiah chapter eight as it relates to Jesus has parallels in the high priestly prayer which Jesus prayed in John 17. Isaiah chapter eight speaks of the Messiah's disciples and the children which God has given Him. In Jesus' prayer, He refers to His disciples as those whom God has given Him out of the world. In Isaiah chapter eight, the Messiah prays for God to bind up the testimony, to seal the law among His disciples. In Jesus' prayer, He prays for God to keep His disciples and to sanctify them through God's truth. In Isaiah chapter eight, the children are signs and wonders in Israel. In Jesus' prayer, Jesus says that He is sending His disciples into the world and prays that they may have a unity of love which will demonstrate that God sent Jesus into the world. Both passages, these three verses in Isaiah chapter eight and Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17, address the issue of the faithfulness of Jesus' disciples.

Our first point was "Fear God." Our second point was "Be Faithful." Our third point is "**Forsake the False.**" Whenever people forsake God, they fill the void, the vacuum with some other trust. The masses in Judah prided themselves in their worship at the temple at Mount Zion, but their true trust wasn't

in the Lord. This is demonstrated by whom they went to for counsel and guidance, especially as things began to deteriorate and as times became chaotic and uncertain. They did not turn to God. Instead they turned to the occult and demonic practices. They followed the example of depraved King Saul who, when facing a critical battle with the Philistines, went to the witch of Endor and told her to call up the dead prophet Samuel.

Indeed, it is true that when people turn from the God of Scripture, when people turn from the living and true God, they always turn to something else. Some turn to a barren secular world devoid of anything supernatural, but many turn instead to the occult, to the dark side of the supernatural. They look for guidance in seances and tarot cards and psychics and ouiji boards and witchcraft and horoscopes. The prophet says that all who look in such places for light will remain in deep darkness. There will never be a dawning for them, no coming morning light. The darkness will only get deeper for them.

As the darkness of error is joined by the darkness of judgment, as they begin to experience homeless wandering and hunger and distress, they will remain in spiritual darkness. Apart from the grace of God, they will not acknowledge the error of their ways. They will not admit that they are reaping what they themselves had sown, that their calamities are the consequences of their own sin. Instead they will harden further and become bitter and angry. Instead of repenting, they curse God and the king God had set over them.

We find something similar in the book of Revelation:

Revelation 16:8-11

- 8 Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and power was given to him to scorch men with fire.
- 9 And men were scorched with great heat, and they blasphemed the name of God who has power over these plagues; and they did not repent and give Him glory.
- 10 Then the fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom became full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues because of the pain.
- 11 They blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds.

In their time of darkness, instead of turning to the Lord, who is the only true light, they harden in their commitment to the darkness and in their spiritual bitterness and anger.

In such times of unrepentant unbelief, our motto should be

- 20 To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

God's truth is our light in a dark world. The truth found in God's Word is our only infallible rule of faith and practice. The Word of God is the foundation upon which we build our understanding of life. The Word of God is our touchstone with which we test every opinion and idea. The Word of God is the truth which is so ultimately true that we accept it because it is true and because there is no truer truth by which to test it. We must forsake the false and remain true to God's word.

We can become discouraged if we measure success the way the world measures success. The world measures success in terms of power and popularity and wealth. The people of God are often weak, persecuted and poor, and the world does not hold them in high regard. We mustn't let this discourage us. When ministry is difficult, remember the counsel of Isaiah chapter eight: fear God, be faithful and forsake falsehood.