

33 years ago this spring, Charles Malik, the former Lebanese Ambassador to the U. S., gave the commencement address at Wheaton College outside Chicago. Here's an excerpt of what he said to graduates that day:

“They tell you there is steady progress in history; they tell you modern man is better and happier than any man in the past; they tell you we are more advanced, spiritually, morally, intellectually than all the ages of the past. This is all false. In the more important things in life, history does not disclose steady progress. There are a few shining peaks of the spirit with many intervening sloughs and valleys. Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Chrysostom, Aquinas, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dostoyevski – we have nobody comparable to these men in our age. You can live ten lives on them, and the remarkable thing is that they are more relevant to the present than any man in the present. Progress! Fiddlesticks! Who has progressed from the *Psalms*, or from *Isaiah or Jeremiah*, or from the New Testament? (*Time*, June 15, 1981, 55)

Seven sermons on Isaiah do scant justice to the greatness of Isaiah. Every Christian ought to tackle Isaiah once in a lifetime, even if it took two years to do it. When you dig in, be prepared to be amazed at the scope of his vision. Isaiah can be particular; he is never parochial. Even more astonishing, what he wrote escaped the jealous boundaries of his own day and age. He spoke with fresh force 700 years later to those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus Christ. They speak with fresh force today.

Trying to do justice to Isaiah with “shabby equipment, always deteriorating” is this pastor’s nightmare. But I have to try. Three passages from Isaiah 40, Isaiah 7, and Isaiah 44 express a theme that links the main sections of Isaiah’s prophecy. They also reveal the scope of his vision. I hope you walk away with a sense of why Ambassador Malik placed Isaiah among the pinnacles of the human spirit, and why Isaiah speaks with fresh force to our dangerous world. Let’s begin in Isaiah 40.

### **He Brings Princes to Naught**

Even sleepy readers, trying to plod their way through the Bible or Isaiah in particular, will know they have stumbled upon something special when they read Isaiah 40. New Testament writers quoted it as foretelling the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Georg Handel and *Chariots of Fire* set it to music. People who profess an inability to memorize anything learn verse 31 with little effort. Preachers draw on its sublime evocation of the God of all creation to imitate for a moment Isaiah’s vision of God and His care of His people and His sovereignty over all things. The verses we consider today place a great deal of political pomp and circumstance in perspective.

Isaiah raised a question in verse 18 he wanted to answer: **To whom, then, will you compare God?** He dismissed the idols the rest of the world wallowed in with withering irony at the end of verse 20: **He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.** Against the foil of that flimsy excuse of a religion Isaiah sets the living God in verses 21-24.

**Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the**

**ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.**

I read this passage for the first time, while living in Dallas, TX not long after the assassination of President Kennedy. I watched over a 20-year period as one President after the other never served more than one term: Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter. Shelley's great poem captures the emotion.

I met a traveller from an antique land  
Who said: `Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.  
And on the pedestal these words appear –  
“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away. (Shelley, *Ozymandias*)

Let Chinese Secretary Xi Jinping, President Putin of Russia, and President Obama hold their collective breath before the One who **brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.**

### **They Come When Called**

Isaiah used another turn of phrase that exalts the glory of God and makes the glory of man look like snowflakes on a dung heap. This turn of phrase brings us back to Isaiah 7. We have been here before. Remember? The King of Judah was besieged in Jerusalem by two armies. He was afraid that his adversaries were going to capture Jerusalem and kill him. It was a fearful time for him and his people.

Isaiah tried to tell him he had nothing to fear and gave him a sign that would vindicate Isaiah's prediction. **The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.** All the king had to do was watch that young virgin get married, bear a son, and then watch the danger to his city disappear before the boy knew right from wrong. That was the sign, and that's what happened.

That's where we stopped in the previous sermon. That's not where Isaiah stopped. He went on to say to Ahaz, “If you thought those armies were a problem, you ain't seen nothing yet.” Another king is coming your way. Verses 17-20: **The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah – he will bring the king of Assyria. In that day the Lord will whistle for flies from the distant streams of Egypt and for bees from the land of Assyria. They will all come and settle in the steep ravines and in the crevices in the rocks, on all the thornbushes and in all the water holes. In that day the Lord**

**will use a razor hired from beyond the River – the king of Assyria – to shave your head and the hair of your legs and to take off your beards also.**

That's what happened, but it's the dismissive way Isaiah spoke about the coming of Assyria against Jerusalem: **In that day the Lord will whistle for flies from the distant streams of Egypt and for bees from the land of Assyria.** As you whistle for your dog and tell her to sit and roll over, so the Lord of the nations summons the superpowers of earth to do His bidding.

It's important to remember in Isaiah that the Lord summoned Assyria to destroy half of the nation of Israel and threaten the other half with the same peril. Do you suppose the Lord whistled for Osama bin Laden on September 11 to do His bidding? I don't know that. Neither can I rule that out. Do you suppose the Lord whistled for China and India to begin their startling rise to power?

If the prospect of God's sovereignty over the affairs of earth make you feel small, as they make me feel small and dependent, it is good to remember that the peoples of the earth **are like grasshoppers** in the sight of the Lord, and He **brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.** It is also good to remember that the sovereign Lord of all the earth cherishes the apple of His eye and will cause the mighty ones of earth to serve His chosen people. We see that next in Isaiah 44:24-28.

### **Cyrus, the Lord's Anointed**

Before we look at this startling passage (startling passages just keep coming in Isaiah!), I need to make you aware of something that is out of place. Isaiah 44:28 and Isaiah 45:1 talk about Cyrus. It means Cyrus the Great, the first King of the Persian Empire. He was a truly great king. What makes him seem out of place in Isaiah is that he lived 200 years after Isaiah. So, how does his name appear in chapter 44?

I'm going to tell you my theory and then move on. It doesn't affect the splendor of chapter 44. We know Old Testament writers copied from previous Old Testament writers. Jeremiah copied from 2 Kings. Micah copied from Isaiah. One Psalm copies from another. One gospel in the New Testament copies from another. They seldom just copied. They often changed and shed light on what they copied. It was a much more fluid situation than we are used to with our copyright laws.

I think some later, devout writer saw what King Cyrus of Persia had done for the Jews. The King allowed Jews in large numbers to return to their homeland, rebuild Jerusalem, and rebuild the temple. The later writer took what came to him from the age of Isaiah and put Cyrus's name there to vindicate Isaiah's message. That's how Cyrus ended up in Isaiah. So, let's read it. Jerusalem had long ago been destroyed by the Babylonians. The Jews were in exile in Babylon and Persia. Against that heart-wrenching background these verses make sense.

**“This is what the Lord says – your Redeemer, who formed you (Israel) in the womb. I am the Lord, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense, who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers (the prophets of old), who say of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be inhabited,’ of the towns of Judah, ‘They shall be built,’ and of their ruins, ‘I will restore them,’ who says to the watery deep, ‘Be dry, and I will dry up your streams,’ who says of Cyrus,**

**‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, ‘Let it be rebuilt,’ and of the temple, ‘Let its foundations be laid.’”**

When Isaiah said that God whistled for the King of Assyria to come and do his bidding, he was being dismissive of human pride and pomp. He remains Lord of all the earth, but in this passage the language becomes tender.

In Isaiah 44:28 the Lord calls Cyrus **my shepherd**. In Isaiah 45:1 He calls him **his anointed**. I once saw a bumper sticker in Portland, OR that said, “We want Mashiach now!” It meant, “We want the Messiah now!” Mashiach is a Hebrew word that means *anointed*. It’s word used here in Isaiah 45:1.

For the Lord to call a pagan king **my shepherd** and my **anointed** means that God had summoned Him for merciful treatment of the people of Israel in their exile. In Isaiah’s own inimitable words placed in the mouth of God His purpose went like this: **“Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’ Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth.”** (Isaiah 43:5-6) Cyrus’s royal decree opened the door for Jews to go back to their ancient homeland, and they came and rebuilt Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. And they came again the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the Lord summoned pagan and sometimes Christian heads of state to show merciful treatment to the Jewish communities of Europe, shattered by the Holocaust.

### Take Aways

The apt response to Isaiah’s vision of the sovereignty of God is Psalm 33:8-11.

**Let all the earth fear the Lord;  
let all the people of the world revere him.  
For he spoke, and it came to be;  
he commanded, and it stood firm.  
The Lord foils the plans of the nations;  
he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.  
But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever,  
the purposes of his heart through all generations.**

The world we live in is changing. Everything nailed down is coming loose. We all feel it. We feel uneasy about the changes. Isaiah’s vision of God calls us to believe that the Lord of the nations inserts His hand into the glove of history and makes things happen that serve His purpose. He does it in a way that keeps human freedom intact. He does it in a way that makes unexpected good come out of unparalleled evil. He does it in a way that excuses no one from pursuing justice and truth in human affairs. Isaiah’s vision of God calls us to honor those in authority over us but always to remember that we have a higher calling to honor and obey the One who is authority over them.

The task of the Church – of pastors and people alike – in our changing and uncertain world is to bear faithful and sacrificial witness to the truth of Christianity without a hint of self-righteousness. So, let us say, whatever befalls our world, our nation, that our God reigns, and we call upon people everywhere to fear Him and revere Him,

who **brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing**, but His own **plans stand firm forever**.