

## JESUS, A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES

**2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. 3 He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.” 4 But I said, “I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet what is due me is in the LORD’s hand, and my reward is with my God.” 5 And now the LORD says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength— 6 he says: “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 my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” 7 This is what the LORD says— the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel— to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: “Kings will see you and stand up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”**

Isaiah was Israel’s pastor and prophet for many decades. He proclaimed the word of God from about the 740s or perhaps even earlier until around 680 BC—a ministry of at least 60 years. One ancient Jewish source<sup>4</sup> says that Isaiah’s father was the brother of King Amaziah, who was born in the 870s BC, and so Isaiah may have begun his ministry even earlier than the guess I have already given.

It was the period of Assyrian expansion and conquest. God’s people were divided into two kingdoms, and the northern kingdom Israel was trying to use an ally, Aram, to provide a big enough army to keep the Assyrians from attacking them. When Israel asked the southern kingdom of Judah to help, the King of Judah instead asked the Assyrians to help him against Israel and Aram. This ended with both Israel and Aram being conquered by Assyria, and their people were carried off into exile. The people brought in to re-settle Israel by the Assyrians intermarried with the remnant left behind, and they eventually became known as the Samaritans.

The exile of Israel left Judah with no buffer state, and soon the Assyrians were on the doorstep of Jerusalem itself. The Jews received help from God thanks in part to the prayers of Isaiah and their godly king, Hezekiah, but Isaiah knew that Judah’s days were numbered. Not because of the strength of the Assyrian soldiers-- it wouldn’t even be Assyria that would finally conquer Judah-- but the coming destruction was the result of Judah’s many sins.

<sup>4</sup> Talmud, Meg. 15a.

As Isaiah look ahead to the future of Judah and Jerusalem, the picture looked pretty grim. Exile was coming for Judah in the south just as it had come for Israel in the north, and their allies as well. This trouble had come because of the sin of unbelief, which Isaiah depicts as darkness.

When darkness is used as a picture in the Bible, it the darkness of sin, of unbelief, but also of the uncertainty and fear that comes with unbelief. Even a room in your own home becomes a place of uncertainty when it is dark, and any future we try to imagine without Christ will be so dark that we fall into terror and even despair.

But Christ is a light, a light for us all, the pillar of fire that led the Israelites out of Egypt and all along their way through the forty years in the wilderness. Isaiah puts words into the mouth of Jesus prophetically by showing us the agony he would go through as he was about to be arrested and put on trial for the sins of mankind.

Some of the things Isaiah hears Jesus saying include: **“I have labored in vain,”** and **“I have spent my strength for nothing at all.”** It seemed to the Savior that everyone had either run away from him or turned on him. We need to remember that this is what God still thinks of each one of our sins. There is no sin that isn’t serious. There is no sin so small that God overlooks it on account of it being “small potatoes.”

If I let my mouth run foul, even when I’m alone or even just in my thoughts, I’ve still broken the Second Commandment, since I’m failing even to build up my own faith and use God’s name and the language he’s given to me in the best possible way. The same is true if any one of us secretly lets the sensual desire of coveting grow inside, or if we let ourselves get caught up in gossip or false accusations.

Many of us are most vulnerable to sins of this kind, the seemingly tiny sins, the minor infractions that pale in comparison to what the world around us is guilty of, and we commit these transgressions when we’re tired, when we’re lonely, when we’re grieving, or when other troubles come. The devil like to kick us when we’re down and then point his accusing finger at us to make us lose hope.

But there is hope. There is light. There is forgiveness.

In verse 5, Isaiah begins to tell us what the Lord God, in this case God the Father, says to God the Son. But he breaks off to describe something else in what grammatically we call a **“parentheses.”** Often we find this kind of interruption actually set off with either parentheses or, as in this case, dashes. The words between the dashes are just as important as those that follow. In this case, they tell us that God’s Messiah, Jesus Christ, was always intended by God to restore Israel to God, not to win them back with an army and weapons the way that Abraham brought

back Lot from the kings who captured him in 2,000 BC. No, the Lord Jesus would **gather** the people, he would call them with his word, with the Gospel.

But after the dashes in our text, down in verse 6, we have a passage that is known as **the Great Commission of the Old Testament**. The Savior would indeed rescue Israel and Judah, but God says: "That is too small a thing, just to restore Israel. So **I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.**"

What would you say to a person from a distant island, who wonders whether Jesus died for him? Wouldn't you assure him that the **blood of Jesus** covers over all of his sins? Of course you would. He came to deliver all people, men, woman and children, from the guilt of our sins.

But that also means that when we have bad days, hard days, lonely days, depressing days, that Jesus is still there for us, too. We are not in darkness.

Jesus was **despised and abhorred by his own nation**, but he came for those who despised him, for those who turned on him, for those who ran away from him, and for us, even though sometimes we, even we, wonder and become downcast, as if clouds cover over the shining light that is always there for us.

At the beginning of this prophecy, Isaiah describes the Word of God as a sharpened sword, an arrow, polished and ready for action. A sword that is sharpened has been prepared for the coming battle. An arrow that is polished is not just any old arrow that was picked up because it was handy. God prepared his word to be used in every situation. His word is useful, he tells us, for **teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness**. God's word assures, in certain, true and reliable terms, that just as the guilt of our most serious sins is forgiven, so also is the guilt of our original sin, and even all of those tiny sins scattered throughout every part of our lives like crumbs on the tablecloth and spilling over onto the floor. Jesus our Savior has touched each and every one of them with his blood, he has spoken for our sin, atoned for our sin, covered over our sin, and sent all of it away forever, as far away as east is from west.

There is no Jew or Gentile, no Catholic, pagan, Protestant, Muslim, Mormon or Lutheran whose sins are not covered by the blood of Christ. But only those who know Jesus, who have been baptized in his name, who put their trust in Jesus, benefit from his all-encompassing, world-changing sacrifice.

So we have work to do. We, who know our Savior so dearly, are called upon to share his Gospel of forgiveness with the world. Even those who hate us. Even those who disagree with us. Look past their hateful words and pray that the word of God, that useful, bright, living, active, sharpened and polished word, would always do its good work. God grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen.