

Isaiah

Sermon 26

“Incline Your Heart to Worship For We Have a Mighty Savior”

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Revelation 19:11-21
Isaiah 29:1-14

Revelation 19:11-21

[11] Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. [12] His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. [13] He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. [14] And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. [15] From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. [16] On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

[17] Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, “Come, gather

for the great supper of God, [18] to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.” [19] And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. [20] And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. [21] And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.
(ESV)

Isaiah 29:1-14

- [1] Ah, Ariel, Ariel,
the city where David encamped!
Add year to year;
let the feasts run their round.
- [2] Yet I will distress Ariel,
and there shall be moaning and lamentation,
and she shall be to me like an Ariel.
- [3] And I will encamp against you all around,
and will besiege you with towers
and I will raise siegeworks against you.

[4] And you will be brought low; from the earth you shall speak, and from the dust your speech will be bowed down; your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost, and from the dust your speech shall whisper.

[5] But the multitude of your foreign foes shall be like small dust, and the multitude of the ruthless like passing chaff.

**And in an instant, suddenly,
[6] you will be visited by the LORD of hosts with thunder and with earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.**

[7] And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel,

all that fight against her and her stronghold and distress her,

shall be like a dream, a vision of the night.

[8] As when a hungry man dreams, and behold, he is eating, and awakes with his hunger not satisfied, or as when a thirsty man dreams, and behold, he is drinking, and awakes faint, with his thirst not quenched, so shall the multitude of all the nations be that fight against Mount Zion.

[9] Astonish yourselves and be astonished; blind yourselves and be blind!

**Be drunk, but not with wine;
stagger, but not with strong drink!
[10] For the LORD has poured out upon you
a spirit of deep sleep,
and has closed your eyes (the prophets),
and covered your heads (the seers).**

**[11] And the vision of all this has become to you like the
words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can
read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed." [12]
And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, "Read
this," he says, "I cannot read."**

**[13] And the Lord said:
"Because this people draw near with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me,
and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,
[14] therefore, behold, I will again
do wonderful things with this people,
with wonder upon wonder;
and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
and the discernment of their discerning men shall be
hidden." (ESV)**

I. Introduction

A. Spiritual Decay (29:1a)

In this world, everything falls apart—people, cars, houses, even institutions. Unless it's maintained, even spiritual fervor also dies away. In today's passage, the prophet Isaiah looks at the city of Jerusalem—here called "Ariel"—and asks, is this really the same city where David sought the Lord with all his heart—where he danced before the Lord, prayed to him with passion, and sang Psalms of his own writing? Now the people of Jerusalem had fallen into a rut. The fire in their hearts had burned down, and they were just going through the motions, repeating things outwardly, but disengaging inwardly. Verse 1:

Ah, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David encamped!

Add year to year; let the feasts run their round.

B. Church Life Cycle: Incline, Recline, Decline

This same pattern can happen to individuals, as well as even to churches. Last week at our church vitality weekend, we learned about the church life cycle. Every church goes through a certain pattern over the course of its life:

"Incline is the lifecycle stage when the church is increasing its ministry capacity, doing more and more ministry better and better over time..."

"Recline is the lifecycle stage when the church's ministry capacity

levels off as the church does more or less the same ministry year after year at the same levels of quality and quantity...”

“**Decline** is the lifecycle stage when the church’s ministry capacity decreases. Less and less ministry is done year after year with execution more and more compromised...”¹

Unless God intervenes with his divine power, then churches go through this pattern of spiritual decay—from incline, to recline, to decline. Where are we? We are either in the late recline stage, or early decline stage. We cannot just go through the motions—we cannot simply be present-oriented, program-driven, inwardly focused on ourselves, asking the same few people to serve over and over for decades, and only receiving established Christians as new members who transfer in from other congregations. We need to enter a new “incline” stage where we are *future* oriented, vision-driven, outwardly focused on the *community*, developing new leaders, and growing through *conversion*—people coming to faith and joining a church for the first time ever. *This* is where we’re going—we’re about to move from a *sustaining* mentality to an *advancing* mentality. We have a mighty Savior who has won total victory over all our enemies—over sin, suffering, sickness, and death. We need to worship God from the heart as if that victory is already complete and we stand on the field of victory. For he has already done it indeed. He has created time, and he stands outside time, and prophecy is simply God telling us what he has already done *within* time at another

¹ Kenneth Priddy, *G.O.1 Training Manual*, 29.

stage in the story. The book is already written, and God has told us *now* what happens at the *end*.

II. God's Strange Work

A. Crisis as Judgment

Where the spiritual decay sets in is when we forget about the victory that God has already won in the future, and instead start to get cynical and resigned to the temporary defeats and patterns of decay we see all around us. We start to harden up, and die on the inside, little bit by little bit. This can even happen with believers if we're not careful—you can end up just going through the motions at worship, whether it's a high liturgical worship, or a rock band with flashing lights. It's not your feeling or your experience that matters, but the actual spiritual devotion of your heart before the living God. The book of Isaiah is clear in holding individuals responsible for the state of their hearts toward the Lord, whatever that may be. And when the spiritual numbness goes on too long—when people are ignoring God or treating him with contempt—then he eventually brings judgment on them.

Verses 2-4 show this, where God brings the hostile Assyrian army to besiege Jerusalem. Assyria was the ISIS of the ancient world. Their practices were cruel, violent, and horrifying. They conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, and deported their people. They invaded Judah and conquered everything but the capital city of Jerusalem itself, laying siege with an army of at least 200,000 soldiers.

B. Crisis as Catalyst

But the same scorching sun that hardens the clay also melts the ice. God's judgment can serve as a catalyst to his elect, to wake them up from their spiritual torpor, and set them back on the path to total devotion to the Lord. We heard about that two weeks ago with the end of Isaiah 28. God can use crises in our lives as judgment to destroy the wicked, or as a veiled mercy to call the elect back to a living relationship with our merciful God. Crisis can therefore act as a catalyst for renewal. How about you? When crisis hits, do you run *to* God, or *away* from God?

For Christians, all defeats and suffering will be temporary. Don't let it get you down. As we heard at the end of Isaiah 28, God is like a farmer allowing only enough hardship in your life to bring the best spiritual fruit. He puts boundaries on it of both severity and duration. So hang on. For when the time is right, God will act with a mighty and unstoppable power to bring rescue to his people. That's what he's talking about in verses 5 and following, where he speaks of the Lord visiting suddenly, in an instant.

III. The Glorious Vision: God's Sudden Coming Rescue

A. Partial Fulfillment

1. The Deliverance from Assyria

What did God do when he suddenly showed up? He spoke of a mighty

rescue in verses 5-8. In Isaiah 37:36, we can read about what he actually did: *And the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. [37] Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh.*

2. The Frustration of God's Enemies (vv. 7-8)

God's enemies were frustrated. They who sought to devour the people of God were foiled in their plans. Verses 7-8 talk about this in terms of people who dream about eating and drinking, but who wake up still hungry and thirsty. They wanted to devour God's people, but did not get to.

C. Complete Fulfillment: Salvation

The whole Assyrian situation was a wake-up call for Judah. Would they take heed? Would they renew their trust and fervent worship from the heart? The rescue from the Assyrians was a miracle that pointed to God's reliability in the ultimate rescue—salvation from sin and death, which he has accomplished through Jesus Christ.

For those we are besieged by sin, suffering, and death—we are to turn to the Lord with zeal and great trust. For Jesus lived the perfect life we should have, then died on the cross to pay the price for our sins, then rose from the dead for our salvation. When we trust in him, then our

greatest enemies of sin, suffering, death, and the devil lie defeated before us—not through anything that *we* have done, but entirely through what Jesus Christ has done *for* us. Is there someone here today who wants to give up struggling on their own with all this? Maybe there's someone here who has never trusted Jesus for their salvation. Perhaps today is the day for that to change. Perhaps *you* are ready to let God stand in for you, to become your rescuer. If so, please pray with me: "Dear Lord, I can't do this on my own. Forgive me. Come fight for me. Rescue me. Save me and give me your joy, your life, your eternal blessing. In Jesus' name, Amen." If this is a new step for you this morning, then please let me know so I can pray for you and encourage you.

The Bible is full of patterns that recur *in* history that point to God's plans at the *end* of history. The city of God is besieged by the Assyrians in 701 BC, by the Babylonians in 586 BC, and by the Romans in AD 70. The book of Revelation² speaks of the people of God being besieged by massive hostile forces at the end of time. And here, in the end, God himself comes with great power and glory to redeem his people, as we heard about in Revelation 19. This is a sure thing. So through faith in Jesus, we are delivered from the *guilt* of sin immediately, we *are* being freed from the *power* of sin gradually, and we *will* be delivered even from the *presence* of sin, finally.

² See also Rev. 20:7-10

IV. Blindness: Ignoring the Vision (vv. 9-12)

These are hugely important truths ever to keep in front of us! But when we let our zeal grow cold and our hearts grow numb, unbelief will smother our faith. That's why people are astonished here in verses 9-12. They didn't really believe God would ever really step in and do something! God's salvation was unexpected for them, because they were unseeing (that is, blind), and unconscious (that is, spiritually asleep). They were uncomprehending—treating the Word of God as a closed book that was irrelevant, too complicated, and not worth reading. And so they were unfaithful and unprepared when our Savior God stepped in and took action. Jesus warns of this very thing, when he says that *the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night*.³

God has told us about his coming victory. That is the vision. Keep it before you, praise the Lord in light of it, and obey him with the certainty of final victory, despite temporary setbacks.

V. Sight: Accepting the Vision

A. God's Promises Are True

May we learn from this passage, and may the Lord give us eyes to see, lest we forget the vision. When the Lord tells us of his *future* victory, that is just as certain as him reporting a *past* victory. Treat what he has said he *will* do as if he has *already* done it, and praise him in light of that.

³ 1 Thess. 5:2. Matthew 24:43.

He keeps all his promises. Praise him like you're in heaven already, and all your problems are solved.

B. His Wonders Along the Way Are Aids to Faith

And God does give us reassurances. I've heard it said that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. That's true to some extent for us as changeable human beings, but it is most certainly true for the living God, who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. God's track record of promise-keeping in the past is a guarantee that he will keep his promises in the future. That's why verse 14 says, *therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder*. This is the Lord, who led his people through the Red Sea. He miraculously saved Jerusalem from the Assyrians. In the physical, historical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, he demonstrated his victory over sin, suffering, death, and the devil. And in our own lives, if we have eyes to see it, we will notice times of his providential care and supernatural grace. So let us trust in him, and if we need a tangible reminder—something to hold in our hands and even taste, then come to the Lord's table and receive communion. For this is both the sign and the seal of our salvation—it is a reminder of what he has done in the past, it is spiritual grace for the present, and it is a signed guarantee of the victory feast to come.

VI. Conclusion: True Worship

So with that confidence, *let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.*⁴

A. Heart Worship

Let us worship God from the heart. Looking at verse 13, we see that we need to draw near to the Lord in our hearts. *Choose* to honor him with all that you've got! Do not be numb to the Lord, or cold, or lukewarm. Let us be on fire in our worship of the Lord! May we choose to obey, when he commands us in Romans 12:11 to be zealous. It says there, *Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your soul and all of your mind and all of your strength!*⁵

B. Fear the Lord—And Nothing Else

And fear the Lord, for this is the beginning of wisdom. That means to honor and respect him from the heart, as the devotion of our souls. Fearing the Lord means listening seriously to what he commands, and seeking to be his faithful servant in all that asks of us. And if we fear the Lord, then we need not fear anything else—for we are ultimately safe in him. When we trust in him, we are freed for a joyful, persevering,

⁴ Galatians 6:9. See also 2 Thess. 3:13; Heb. 12:3.

⁵ Matthew 22:37. Deut. 6:5.

triumphant obedience.

Use the vision of God's victory to stoke the fire of your heart's devotion to God. And what is the ultimate vision? Revelation 7:9–10:

[9] After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, [10] and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

And how will we get there? Jesus gave us the Great Commission: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.* The Great Commission is the work of the ingathering of the multitude we see worshiping in Revelation 7.

And it is in obedience to *this* work given us by Jesus Christ that our church going to go from the recline/decline stage onward to a new incline stage. We will keep God's vision of his victory before us, we will commit ourselves to a new congregational movement of passionate prayer, we will worship God from the heart, we will obey in faith, and we will radically recommit ourselves to reaching our community—through a church plant, and through *every* individual, and *every* group and ministry in the church. From the nursery to the Photeinos,

everything we do is going to have a part to play in the Great Commission. The fields are white with the harvest. There are many people all around us whose names are written in the Lamb's book of Life, who are not yet in *any* church. Let's go find them.

So what can you do today? Incline your heart to worship. Pray. Pray on your own, come to prayer meetings Wednesday at 7 p.m., or Fridays at 1:00 p.m. Speak to me if you would like to be considered to be part of the Great Commission Vision Team, that will work to help us apply the Great Commission to everything we do. Talk to me if you are interested in serving on the church plant team to plan our next steps and to call a church planter. And we are going to need a team of prayer warriors to pray for *each* member of *each* team. It's all hands on deck.

It's time to stop the *re-cline*. It's time to *in-cline* our hearts to the Lord.

Alleluia! Amen.