Israel's Wisdom: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs; the Prophet Isaiah

Let us talk about the book of Ecclesiastes. In the last lesson we talked about the function of wisdom, and we talked about two different types of wisdom literature. We talked about didactic wisdom, which is proverbial and pithy. There are clear distinctions between the righteous and unrighteous, the wise and the foolish. Proverbial wisdom is for the center lane of life. It is when you are going along and things work the way they normally work in the cycles of life. We know that life is not always like that, and the Bible knows that life is not always like that. There are times when life is pushed to its extremes in terms of extreme injustice, death, and the other forms of loss. Life is very clearly out of our control at these points. The wisdom literature embraces that as well in discursive forms of wisdom. Ecclesiastes is very similar to the book of Job in that regard. It is about the extremities of life.

Ecclesiastes is focused on the limit of death and how death is an equivocator. Kohelet in Hebrew is translated “teacher” or “preacher.” Maybe a better translation is “leader of the assembly” or “assemblyman.” It is one who calls together an assembly, and that is where we get this notion of Ecclesiastes. It sounds like the Greek word for church, ecclesia. It is the one who calls the assembly or the teacher of the assembly. He is focused on the fact, time and again, that it does not matter if you are wise or a fool; it does not matter if you work really hard or if you do not. It does not matter if you enjoy many pleasures or few. In the end we all come to the same place. Death is the great equalizer, the great limiter. There is a certain perspective within Ecclesiastes that comes through again and again. He says, “havel havalim” or “vanity of vanities,” and we get a sense of what that phrase means. “Vanity of vanities” is one translation, but “absurdity of absurdities” might be another translation. We get a sense of an epexegetical explanation of what this means when time and again we come across this phrase. All things chase after the wind. Havel havalim plays on the word for “breath.” Ecclesiastes 4:6 says, “Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.” Before that we get several references in Ecclesiastes 2:26.

At the end of the chapter we get some hints toward another theme that is really important. “Man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too I see is from the hand of God, for without him who can eat or find enjoyment. To the man who pleases him God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness. But to the sinner he gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to another one who pleases God. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.” We get the sense of the gift of God, and it is an important phrase in Ecclesiastes. This phrase, “a chasing after the wind,” is in Ecclesiastes 2:11. “When I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind. Nothing was gained under the sun.” The phrase “under the sun” is also another important phrase in Ecclesiastes. “Under the sun” speaks of our limitation of life. There is nothing new under the sun, as we see in chapter 3.

Notice the opening poem in Ecclesiastes 1, which gets at the sense of chasing after something that you cannot capture. It is something that you cannot catch or hold onto. That is the sense of havel havalim. It is grasping after the wind, and you cannot control your life in the end. When you die, all that you worked for goes to someone else. You may be able to have a will, but that is very limited control over what you have gained. In the end it may end up in a trash heap. From a biological and chemical perspective, it ends up as atoms somewhere else in the end anyway. The lack of control over the meaning of one’s own life is an important theme for Ecclesiastes. In chapter 1 we see the circularity of things.

“Havel havalim,
olds kohelat,
Utterly meaningless!
Everything is meaningless.”

What does man gain from all his labor
at which he toils under the sun?
Generations come and generations go,
but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises and the sun sets,
and hurries back to where it rises.
The wind blows to the south and turns to the north;
round and round it goes, ever
returning on its course.
All streams flow into the sea,
yet the sea is never full.
To the place the streams come from,
there they return again.
All things are wearisome,
more than one can say.
The eye never has enough of seeing,
nor the ear its fill of hearing.
What has been will be again,
what has been done will be done again;
there is nothing new under the sun.

We see the circularity of the sun and the wind and the flow of water.

Ecclesiastes is a picture of a wise person seeing his life against the limit of death. How does a wise man respond to that limit? In my view, here is the purpose for the wisdom student of Ecclesiastes: It is to demonstrate the humiliation that death brings such that even the best of lives lived merely for human pleasure or accomplishment is ultimately without meaning. The purpose is to show the wisdom of living faithfully and fearfully before the eternal God. The only thing that makes a life meaningful is relationships. What makes one’s labor or pleasure meaningful is relationships. In the perspective of the teacher, relationship to God and others is what is important. The traditional authorship of Ecclesiastes goes to Solomon, but Solomon is never mentioned. Notice that we have only teacher, son of David, in Ecclesiastes 1:1, and in verse 12 it says, “I, the teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men!” The burden on man is another theme in Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes 2:4 shows something only a king can do, “I undertook great projects. I built houses for myself and vineyards and made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees, reservoirs to water the groves of flourishing trees. Female and male slaves I bought. I own more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.” These verses in Ecclesiastes sound like Solomon even though he is never named.

In Ecclesiastes 3:9-10 we have a preview of the teacher’s conclusion in the face of death. He explores in chapters 1 and 2 the value of hard work. He explores the value of pleasure. He concludes that in the end if one’s sense of self is only in terms of the limits of this physical life, then even the best or wealthiest life in terms of work and pleasure is meaningless because of the limit of death. But the wise person knows otherwise. Ecclesiastes 3:9 says, “What does the worker gain from his toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has set eternity in the
hearts of men, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” Those of us in the West, who have been heavily influenced by Greek thought, want to read that as a reference to the immortal soul. That has typically been the way that we would read that passage. I am not convinced that is what the teacher means, though. The teacher is talking about the fact that God knows the story from the beginning to the end. He is outside the limit of death and time, yet He relates to humankind and me. He has given to humankind an awareness that there was something before and there will be something after. Your life, or my life, is in the sweep of something bigger that God is aware of. God knows the meaning of our lives even if we do not fully understand the meaning of them. We see that the wise man relates to God and receives from God the gift of life, and he enjoys that gift as limited as it is. Verse 13 says, “Everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil. This is the gift of God.” I know that everything God does will endure forever. Even though what I do is so limited, what God does lasts forever. One of the things that God has done is give you and me life and a certain amount of time and energy. As limited as it might be in the sweep of eternity and history, it is a gift of God. That work that God does lasts forever. Nothing can be added to it or taken from it. God does it so that people will revere Him. In chapter 3 we have a hint toward the conclusion of the matter even though the teacher explores other aspects of the limitations of life.

Notice another place he goes in Ecclesiastes 4 regarding how we extend the meaning of our lives. He looks at how we push beyond the limits of our own efforts to do justice, work, and pleasure. We do it by relating to other human beings. Notice this famous passage, often read at weddings, in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” A wise man understands that, on the one hand, even the best-lived life is severely limited by time and energy when placed in the perspective of eternity and history. But on the other hand, one can extend the meaning of that life if one relates in fear and worship to the God who gave that life and if one extends oneself in relationship to others. The teacher explores many things, including the severity of death and its limitations.

We do not have time to look at everything the teacher explores, but one of the things that he points out is one of the reasons that people work so hard. People work hard because they want what other people have. He attributes a lot of human industry to envy and covetousness. Solomon was a very perceptive economist about human nature. He looked deeply into these things. In Ecclesiastes 5:10-20 he says,

```
Whoever loves money never has money enough;  
    whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.  
This too is meaningless…

Naked a man comes from his mother’s womb,  
    and as he comes, so he departs.  
He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand.  
This too is a grievous evil:

As a man comes, so he departs,  
    and what does he gain?,  
    since he toils for the wind? […]

Then I realized it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot.
```

© Fall 2007, Gregory Perry & Covenant Theological Seminary
Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift from God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.

He comes back to the same conclusion in the end. We have the two themes, one of a wise man understanding the severe limitations of life and the equivocation of death. But a wise man responds in awe of God and the gift of life and in extending oneself in relation to others. The perspective is that no matter how wealthy you are, how hard you work, how hard you study, and how much you enjoy things, if you do all those things from the perspective of the severe limitations of life and what death places on that, they are meaningless. But within those severe limitations, if one relates to life as a gift from God, one is wise.

For the outline of Ecclesiastes we have three cycles in the middle of the book. The first cycle is that death limits even work and the wisdom of kings. Work and fear before God, whose work endures, is the second cycle. Humility before God, whose wisdom is supreme, is the third cycle. Another theme that is important is even the limitations on justice in this world. The teacher talks about seeing oppression and justice. In the end he concludes that in the extremities of life, death is and injustice remains. There is a classic quote of discursive wisdom in Ecclesiastes 7:15, “In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.” You would not find that in Proverbs, because in terms of didactic wisdom it is supposed to work that the righteous man is blessed. He does not perish for his righteousness. All we have to do is look at Jesus and know that the righteous perish. The righteous suffer, and that question of injustice, that righteous people die at the hands of the unrighteous, is a question for the wisdom student at the extremity of life. The conclusion of the wise person is that in the end I am severely limited, and my wisdom is severely limited. Wisdom belongs to God, and it is hidden with God. Not only that, but my ability to affect justice is severely limited. In the end justice belongs to God. God will set it right because of His own character.

Let us talk about Song of Songs now. The idea of Song of Songs is that it properly belongs as wisdom literature. There are three main views on the Song of Songs, which is the proper title for it. It is perhaps addressed to Solomon as Solomon’s song of songs or a song of songs to or for Solomon. It belongs in wisdom literature because it teaches about how powerful romantic or erotic love is. It gives a wise understanding of that power. We have a refrain throughout the Song of Songs, beginning in Song of Songs 2:7, and we see it again in Song of Songs 3:5 and Song of Songs 8:4. We are supposed to get this: “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and the does, do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.” Song of Songs 3:5 says, “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and the does, do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.” Then in Song of Songs 8:4, “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you, do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.” A good memory verse for this book is Song of Songs 8:6 and 7, “Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm, for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love it would be utterly scorned.” The Song of Songs is about how powerful love is, particularly sexual love. On the one hand it celebrates that power, and on the other hand it is a call to respect its power. Do not try to awaken it prematurely to the young person.

We see a celebration of sexual love between a Shelomite girl and a shepherd boy. There are different views on this, one of which says it is a collection of love songs between lovers going back and forth interspersed with choruses. Sometimes these come from the girl’s friends and sometimes from family members. We have these poems of love between lovers, first separated in their courtship and in
anticipation of their wedding. They are frustrated by their separation, but in the middle there is an
ingcredible celebration of the wedding night. Then there is the departure of the husband, either literally or
as part of the girl’s nightmare. Part of the other side of this idealization of romantic love is the nightmare
of separation from her husband and the longing that it creates for one another. Then there is a reuniting
of them again. This is something that consumes them and occupies their dreams and everything about
their feelings. They want to get back with each other. That is the main interpretation of Song of Songs.

We have a variation on those love songs where the shepherd boy and the wedding they imagine
themselves having is represented in royal language, the language of gardens and animals coming
through gardens. This has a very powerful erotic and sexual sense about it. There is also the imagery of
the lushness of the gardens, the perfume, moistness, gazelles, and the power of the gazelles. All this is
not only erotic imagery but also royal imagery—the image of royal gardens. The celebration of their
wedding is that of a royal wedding. There is an idealization of their wedding like they have in
Solomon’s court. That is another view.

Another view of Song of Songs is that it is a celebration of lovers, and Solomon is an intruder. His
solicitations of the girl when he comes in procession are rejected at the end. The 1000 shekels are
rejected at the end because love must take its natural course. Its natural course is all directed toward the
shepherd boy, so Solomon’s advances to bring her into his harem are spurned. That is another view.

There are those who see these love poems, not as I have described them to move in a dramatic story
toward a wedding and dealing with separation, but as an anthology of love poems that are somewhat
disconnected between lovers in a course. There is no storyline.

Those are the three views of what we have here. “Song of songs, king of kings, lord of lords” is the song
celebrating romantic love. These various songs are being sung and shared between lovers.

The way I presented the outline of Song of Songs is that there is a storyline here. There is the preview
with love’s strong desire celebrated primarily by the girl. Then we have the man’s invitation, the
woman’s dream, and the joy of the wedding. This is at the center of the Song of Songs. I have to read
this because we have to feel the heat of it just a little bit. It is difficult for us to feel the heat of this
because of the cultural distance we have. We can get at it a little bit, and if you engage your mind, you
can feel the heat of it. Song of Songs 4:10 says,

How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfume than
any spice!
Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue.
The fragrance of your garments is like that of Lebanon.
You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.
Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, with henna and nard, nard and
saffron, calamus and cinnamon, every kind of incense tree and myrrh and aloes and all
the finest spices.
You are a garden fountain, a well of flowing water streaming down from Lebanon.
Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread
abroad.
Let my lover come into his garden and taste its choice fruits.
The climax of the wedding night is Song of Songs 5:1, “I have come into garden, my sister, my bride; / I have gathered my myrrh with my spice. / I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk.” This is about sex, and it is about sex between committed lovers. I say that because of the way things ended in this passage. We have a scene and everything about a wedding and a royal garden. “Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal over your arm, for love is as strong as death.” The signet over the heart was something that two bound in either friendship or a contract would wear. We see examples of this in Genesis. “Its jealousy unyielding as the grave.” This kind of love tolerates no rivals. This is a positive expression of what jealousy is about. “It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love.”

Let me quickly deal with the issue of how Solomon fits in. I do not have a strong sense about this as to which one of these is a better view. Solomon is referred to right at the beginning of the book, but then we have a problem. There are two main places where Solomon comes in, and Song of Songs 3:6 says,

Who is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the merchant?  
Look! It is Solomon’s carriage, escorted by sixty warriors, the noblest of Israel, all of them wearing the sword, experienced in battle, each with his sword at his side, prepared for the terrors of the night.  
King Solomon made for himself the carriage; he made it of wood from Lebanon […]  
Come out, you daughters of Zion, and look at King Solomon wearing the crown, the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, the day his heart rejoiced.

This could be Solomon actually coming with his entourage to intrude on this courtship between the shepherd and the woman. Or it could be the woman’s dream that started in Song of Songs 3:1, “All night long on my bed I looked for the one my heart loves. I looked for him but could not find him. I will get up and go about the city and search for the one.” She talks about the soldiers being prepared for the terrors of the night. She might still be dreaming and now envisions her shepherd boy like Solomon. All the imagery that has been used thus far about their romantic love and the lushness of the royal gardens represents her body as well as the context of their life. This imagery could be her seeing the shepherd boy whom she dreams about coming like Solomon and preparing for his wedding day. Or it could be Solomon intruding on their relationship. That is one question that we have.

If you turn to the end of the book, Solomon appears again in Song of Songs 8:11, “Solomon had a vineyard in Baal-hamon, and he let out his vineyard to tenants. Each was to bring for its fruit a thousand shekels of silver. But my own vineyard is mine to give.” Throughout the whole Song of Songs the vineyard is the woman’s body, affections, and the enjoyment of her body. “My own vineyard is mine to give, the thousand shekels are for you, O Solomon. Two hundred are for those who tend its fruit.” In other words, this is the notion of love running its own course. The interpretation of the thousand shekels at the end is spurning these advances of Solomon to incorporate her into his harem. Solomon reflects on the true nature of love after he has had all of these wives and concubines near the end of his life. That is one view.

The other more traditional view is that it speaks about Solomon having vineyards and tenants. The idea is, “Those things are for Solomon, but what I have is fine.” Solomon is not involved in the relationship, but there is a comparison of their relationship with a royal wedding and with the kind of wedding that Solomon would have in this incredible celebration of romantic love.
So often the Song of Songs is preached on in relation to Jesus’ love for the church. It is certainly true that passages like Ephesians 5 draw on the image of Christ and His bride, the church. It is also true that in the prophets, for example Hosea, one of the primary metaphors in the Old Testament of God’s covenant love for the people of Israel is that of a husband and his wife. Those are metaphors to describe that covenant relationship. If one is to preach about Christ’s love for the church as a husband’s for a bride, it is much more appropriate to do that from Ephesians 5 than from Song of Songs. What Song of Songs and many passages in Proverbs are about is the power of erotic love. It is about sex. It is a celebration of the sexual relationship between a husband and his wife. It is a warning to those who are courting and those who long for a mate not to awaken that because of its power. Those images are very clear in Proverbs as well. It is a piece of wisdom literature about a very important area of our lives. It teaches young men especially how to respect the power of sexual love.

Let us talk about the book of Isaiah. First we need to talk about prophecy and the nature and role of prophecy. I have said this before as we talked about the historical books, that they are called the former prophets for a reason. If you look at Moses, Samuel, and Elijah, men who formed the foundation of Israel’s prophetic tradition, they tell history from a covenantal perspective. They talk about and evaluate history from a covenantal perspective. We talked about looking at the experience of the united kingdom and divided kingdom through the lens of Deuteronomy. The best way to understand prophets is that they were representatives of the covenant to the leaders of Israel, particularly the kings. They were God’s emissaries in two ways. God gave prophets visions; they actually were seers. They often had direct encounters with the Lord and had opportunities to enter in and hear from God. They may even have entered the heavenly counsel, and then they were sent with God’s word to God’s people. This was not a standing office. These people did not choose to be prophets. They were chosen and called by God. Primarily these prophets arose in context of internal apostasy and external threat to represent the covenant to the leaders of God’s covenant people. They held both the king and the people accountable to God.

All of that is to say that prophecy is not primarily predictive. Oftentimes, hermeneutically, when we think of prophecy we think of prediction. That is a wrong way to think about it. That is not to say that prophets do not predict things. Isaiah predicted the rise of Cyrus by name. There were times when prophets had specific predictions. Those times were rare. The foundation of prophecy is that by referring to the covenant a prophet outlines that if you obey God He will bless you. The prophet looks at these imminent threats by other nations coming against them or the internal apostasy and says, “Repent, and if you repent and return to the covenant, God will bless you.” This is straight out of Deuteronomy. The other alternative vision that the prophet presented to the king and the people was, “If you keep going this way, worshiping other gods and placing your trust in foreign alliances in order to address these external threats, God will judge you.” It was not prediction that the prophets brought. They extended the future of Israel in a covenantal framework. They said there are two ways to go: the way of obedience and blessing, and the way of continued disobedience and judgment.

The prophet primarily represented the covenant and in many ways was God’s prosecuting attorney. The prophets brought lawsuits against God’s people. The covenant is a constitution and a legal framework. The prophet brought charges against the people, and the Lord brought them into court. You have two types of speeches primarily. There are oracles of woe or judgment, not only against Judah and Israel but also against the nations. “Woe to Assyria; woe to Egypt.” Then you have oracles of will or salvation. “Look! The Lord will deliver you. Turn to the Lord.” Look at Isaiah 3, where we have some good examples of this. Isaiah 3:8 says, “Jerusalem staggers; Judah is falling. Their words and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence. The look on their faces testifies against them. Woe to them! They have brought disaster upon themselves. Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they
will enjoy the fruit of their deeds. Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them. They will be paid back for what their hands have done […] Yahweh takes his place in court. He rises to judge the people. The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and the leaders of his people. ‘It is you who have ruined my vineyard. The plunder from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people?’ The prophet picks up on the imagery of wounded, unfaithful Jerusalem in Isaiah 1. God dwells in the midst of them in the temple. You can hear the legal language in this passage about testimony against the people. God brings charges against the people.

In Isaiah 5 you can see a whole litany of charges against the people. Verse 11 says, “Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after drink […] My people will go into exile for their lack of understanding. The grave enlarges its appetite and opens its mouth […] Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit along with wickedness […] Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.” There was social, theological, moral, and spiritual corruption according to the law and the covenant. The prophet represented the covenant to the king and the people, and he served as the emissary of God’s Word.

In Isaiah 55 we have a wonderful example of an oracle of salvation. “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. […] I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. […] Seek the Lord while he may be found. […] Let the wicked forsake his way. […] Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him […] he will freely pardon…” “I will” is the language of the oracle of salvation and of the covenant renewal. It is similar to Genesis 12. We have these two main types of speeches that indicate the prophets’ vocation, which is to represent the covenant to the people of God.

When it comes to Isaiah we see that he has his vision in Isaiah 6 in the year that King Uzziah died. The ministry of Isaiah ran from 740 BC to 686 BC. The fall of the northern kingdom of Israel took place in 722 BC. The city of Samaria was the capital under Assyria. In 740 BC Isaiah foresaw the threat of Assyria. This is the major focus at the beginning, and it dominates Isaiah. Toward the end of his ministry Isaiah directly warned Hezekiah to not show the Babylonian delegation the temple and all the things in the temple. Isaiah saw that Judah also would be carried off into exile. Isaiah did not see the fall of Jerusalem because that happened later. Jeremiah was an eyewitness to the fall of Jerusalem, not Isaiah. In Isaiah 40 through 66 in particular, Isaiah foresees the renewal of Jerusalem after the exile and after Jerusalem is judged. He talks about it earlier than that, too, even in Isaiah 2. In some cases Isaiah predicts the rise of Cyrus the Persian king and that God will use him as an anointed one. That is prediction, and it did not happen in Isaiah’s lifetime. The main thing that dominates Isaiah’s historical ministry is the threat of Assyria. Toward the end we begin to see the rise of Babylon and the trouble that Babylon will cause. He foresees the anticipated return back to the land when the Lord returns to Israel. There is something beyond exile.

The first thing that we see Isaiah confront is the Syro-Ephraimite coalition. The Syrian and Israelite kings want to get together. At first they want to take over Judah, but they cannot overpower it. Isaiah 7:1-17 says,

When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Ussiah, was king of Judah, king Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it. Now the house of David was told, “Aram has allied itself with Ephraim”; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind. But
the Lord said to Isaiah, “Go out, you and your son Shear-jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washman’s Field. Say to him, ‘Be careful, keep calm and do not be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah. Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah’s son have plotted your ruin, saying, “Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart, divide it among ourselves and make the song of Tabeel king over it.”’ Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says, “It will not take place, it will not happen.”” [...] Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, “Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.” Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David, is it not enough to try the patience of men? Will you also try the patience of God? Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and you will call him Immanuel. He will eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. 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. The Lord is going to bring on you and on your people and the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria.”

The two kings are the kings of Syria and Israel. Assyria will cut off the head of Syria and Israel. Isaiah asks the Davidic ruler Ahaz to ask the Lord to give him a sign, to place his trust in the Lord. In Isaiah 7 and 8 there is continued rebellion on Ahaz’s part. We have a warning that Assyria will come against Judah. Assyria is the Lord’s instrument in Isaiah 8. Verse 7 says, “…therefore the Lord is about to bring against them a mighty flood water. The king of Assyria and all his pomp will overflow its channels, run over its banks, and sweep into Judah, swirling over it, passing through it and reaching up to the neck. Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land, O Immanuel!”

Isaiah and his children are symbols that represent the Lord’s word. We see with Jeremiah and Ezekiel as well that not only do they represent the Lord’s covenant, but oftentimes God calls them to do symbolic actions. Ezekiel lays on his side and makes a little siege around Jerusalem. We get the scenes played out. What happens here is the prophecy, “A virgin shall conceive and bring forth a son.” In one sense this tells that the house of David will continue. We also have the sense of Immanuel, “God will be with you.” Isaiah and his wife have a child, and they name their child Maher-shalal-hashbaz, which means “swift to the booty, swift to the plunder.” This represents the sweeping judgment of Assyria against the threat of Aram and of Israel. Shear-jashub means “a remnant will return.” Immanuel is an important name that means “God with us.” God with us in this context means that God will protect us and take care of us if we trust in him. He will keep us and preserve the house of David. Assyria comes up to the neck. We see with Hezekiah that that is exactly what happened. Sennacherib conquered all the cities of Judah. Only Jerusalem was preserved, and this was because of Hezekiah’s obedience, prayer, and repentance in terms of Isaiah’s representation of the covenant word to him.

Let me leave you with something important. “Real politque” is the art of international high-rise, high-wire act diplomacy. How can I figure out as the king how to align myself economically and militarily with other powers to resist these powers that are on the rise? This is the art of real politque. For the most part, God does not like that. God did not like it when Judah wanted to make an alliance with Egypt to protect herself against Assyria. Time and time again we hear the prophets say, “Do not do that.” What happens here is that first by a threat and then by request we have the two northern kings wanting Judah to increase this power against Assyria. In a very mixed bag the Lord says that the house of David will continue. We will look at that in the next lesson in terms of Isaiah 9 and 11 and the root and branch of Jesse that will arise. But also in the very person of the child Maher-shalal-hashbaz we have a more immediate fulfillment in terms of Immanuel. What God said is actually going to happen. Syria and Israel
are not going to overtake Judah. In fact, by the time that Maher-shalal-hashbaz can tell right from wrong, they will be victims of Assyria. The first big crisis and threat is internal corruption of covenant infidelity and external threats addressed through the art of real politique. Isaiah’s role was to represent the covenant to King Ahaz, and later he would represent it to King Hezekiah as well.