The Prophet Isaiah, Continued; Jeremiah

In the last lesson we talked about the role of prophecy and how the hermeneutics of reading prophecy recognized that the prophet’s role was unlike the ancient Near Eastern prophets. Prophecy is something that happens in other royal courts. We saw with Balak hiring Balaam the desire to use prophecy first as predictive and second as an example of mobilizing a propaganda machine to establish political support for one’s wars and various policies. We have from Babylon the omen texts, and these texts are not moral in nature but are cause-and-effect oriented. We have the ecstasies of Mari, which are also Babylonian. Through dreams and trances they warned the kings of rebellion and economic trouble. We see examples of this in terms of the dreams of Pharaoh and Joseph interpreting his dreams. The Acadian prophecies were often political speech or predictive, and sometimes they were documented after the event.

What is interesting about Israel is how rarely the prophets of Israel spoke predictively. Their primary role was to represent the covenant in times of internal apostasy and external threat. They represented the Sinaiatic covenant to the royal court primarily. We have examples of prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel who were among the exilic community. They were not in a royal setting. When it comes to Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah, who are the magisterial prophets, their primary function was in the royal court. They were emissaries of God’s covenant, and since God’s covenant is a constitution, they brought lawsuits against the people. Last time we read from Isaiah 3 about the particular woes that were pronounced. The Lord brings His people into court, and His prosecuting attorney is Isaiah.

The prophets make some predictions, and Isaiah in particular foresees the role of Cyrus, king of Persia, long before Cyrus is born. Isaiah foresees how the Lord will use Cyrus. He comes into the Lord’s presence in Isaiah 6, and we see another example of the divine court in Isaiah 40. In this case prophets function as seers. They are allowed into the divine council, and they take this message back to the people. They are seers as well as those who bring the Word of God. What is interesting is that 350 times in the prophets the focus is over and over again, “The word of the Lord came to…” It comes to Isaiah or Jeremiah. Other common phrases are, “This is what the Lord says” or “Thus says the Lord through his prophet.” The primary role is as an emissary of the Word of God and of the covenant of God to the people of God. Prophets were not primarily predictive, although there are instances where they did this. We saw an example of this in Isaiah 7 where the prophet made predictions.

It is important to remind ourselves of the historic context of Isaiah’s 50-year ministry. We have spoken about three dates that are really important in terms of Samuel and Kings and Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Three very important dates are 722 BC, which was the fall of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians. We also have 586 BC, which was the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon. The Cyrus edict and the return of the first returnees who came back to the land happened in 538 BC. Primarily Isaiah, in his 50-year ministry from the time of Uzziah to the time of Hezekiah, talked about and ministered in the shadow of the Assyrian threat.

The focus of Isaiah is on Jerusalem even though Isaiah talks about how the Lord is sovereign over the nations. That is a very prominent theme of Isaiah, but it begins and ends with Jerusalem. Isaiah 1 in particular gives us a preview of the entire book. Look at Isaiah 1, and you will see a contrast. We see, first of all, that the ministry of Isaiah is set in the reigns of Uzziah all the way to Hezekiah. It is in terms of a vision, so Isaiah is a seer. He is provided entrance into the Lord’s council. We see that primarily in Isaiah 6 with the vision in the temple, but we also see it again in Isaiah 40. Isaiah 1:4 and following says,

Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption!
They have forsaken Yahweh; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him. Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil. Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire. Your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you […] Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of God, you people of Gomorrah! “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the LORD. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats […] Stop bringing meaningless offerings! […]” See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her—but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow’s case does not come before them. Therefore the Lord, [Yahweh] Almighty, the mighty one of Israel, declares, “Ah, I will get relief from my foes and avenge myself on my enemies. […]” I will restore your judges as in the days of old, your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City.” Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness. But rebels and sinners will be broken, and those who forsake the LORD will perish.

The Holy One of Israel is a very important title for the Lord in Isaiah. The whole context of this is at the time in which Sennacherib had a vice grip around the throat of Jerusalem and all the cities of Judah had been burned. The only thing that was left was Jerusalem at the time of Hezekiah. It should have been shocking to the people in Jerusalem that the rulers of Sodom were told to listen to the law of God. In this chapter Isaiah speaks to Jerusalem, the beloved daughter and bride, as a harlot and enemy. Notice the progress of where this prophecy goes. In chapter 1 we see a contrast between an unfaithful harlot city of Jerusalem and a later Jerusalem. Something happens afterward, and judgment is coming. Judgment is the focus of Isaiah’s pronouncement, but it is judgment with the hope that afterward there will be a time of comfort. It will be a time of salvation, consolation, renewal, and return. It is a time that Isaiah speaks about of restoring Jerusalem to its rightful place and to its calling in the midst of the nations.

In the past, several people have challenged the notion of a single authorship of Isaiah. Starting in the 1890s specifically in regard to his commentary on Isaiah in 1892, Bernard Duhm began this notion of three Isaiahs. There is Proto-Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah, and Trito-Isaiah. There is a division of Isaiah with chapters 1 through 39 being the first Isaiah and chapters 40 through 55 being a second Isaiah, and after Duhm others began to talk about chapters 56 through 66 as a third Isaiah. What Duhm focused on was the time span of the book. He said that the book obviously speaks in the second half to the exilic community, well past the time of Hezekiah. There is a different focus and subject there. The Assyrian threat is the focus of Isaiah 1 through 39, and Babylon and Persia and salvation are the focus of chapters 42 through 66.

That is a neat division there, and we have gotten a hint that Isaiah 1 and other parts of chapters 1 through 39 already begin to talk about the hope. They already begin to look at important themes that will be played out further in Isaiah 40 through 66. For example, in Isaiah 9 and 11 we have the focus on the Messiah, the root of Jesse. The focus is on the One whom the Lord’s spirit will be upon without measure and who will rule with wisdom, justice, and faithfulness. There are some problems with this division, talking about Isaiah 1 through 39 as a book of judgment and 40 through 66 as a book of salvation. That is the way in which critical scholarship began to look at this. Then they had big problems with the specific mention of Cyrus in Isaiah 44:28 and Isaiah 45:1-2. As you will recall, 1 Kings 13 mentions
Josiah by name in terms of the prophecy there. It is interesting that we have no textual evidence, even from the Dead Sea scrolls, of any sort of breaks in the text of Isaiah. We do not have any textual evidence of a so-called first Isaiah with only chapters 1 through 39 in the book. We have the whole text of Isaiah.

Let us look at the New Testament to find examples of Isaiah’s unity as well. John 12:37-41 is an easy example of this. It says, “Even after Jesus had done these miraculous signs in their presence they still would not believe in him, and this was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: ‘LORD, who has believed our message […]’ For this reason they could not believe because as Isaiah says elsewhere, ‘He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts so that they neither see with their eyes nor understand with their hearts nor turn that I would heal them.’” The first quote is from Isaiah 52, and the second quote is from Isaiah 6. We have a quote from Isaiah 53 and Isaiah 6 right next to each other, and John says that Isaiah said these things. In terms of the New Testament and the Dead Sea scrolls, there is no textual evidence of a first, second, and third Isaiah.

The purpose of Isaiah’s vision is to encourage Judah to reject foreign gods and alliances to remain loyal to Yahweh and to encourage future readers in exile to repent of cultic and social sin for the Lord to return a faithful remnant to Zion. Look at Isaiah 6 and notice Isaiah’s commission. This is a very familiar passage of his vision of the Lord seated on a throne, high and lifted up, in the temple surrounded above and around by seraphs. They all call to each other, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory.” Again, the temple is a touchstone, the footstool of the Lord, as Isaiah 66 would say. It is not a place that can contain the Lord. It is only the place where He touches His foot to the earth. Isaiah says in Isaiah 6:5, “Woe to me! I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

The reign of the Lord is not only over Jerusalem and Judah but also over Israel, Syria, Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, and Persia. This is a huge and important theme for Isaiah. The Lord says He needs to send someone to bring His message to His people. Verse 9 says, “Go and tell this people, ‘Be ever hearing but never understanding, ever seeing but never perceiving.’ Make the heart of the people callous. Make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and turn and be healed.” In many ways, Isaiah’s ministry was to bring about a hardening of Judah that would bring about judgment that would make a way for Judah and Jerusalem’s purification so they would return to their role as the Lord’s servant. Verse 11 says, “‘How long, O LORD?’ and he answered, ‘Until the cities lie ruined and the houses are left deserted, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.’” We have this theme also of a remnant or a stump. We have a picture of the clearing away of all of the dross in the covenant community. It is a purification through judgment at the hands of Assyria and Babylon that then will bring about renewal. It is a renewal of covenant—what Isaiah calls a covenant of peace. We will see this later in the book.

Isaiah’s message to Jerusalem is about judgment and restoration. Isaiah asserts the Lord’s reign and the nations in chapters 7 through 39. Isaiah asserts the Lord’s reign over Babylon and Persia in chapters 40 through 55. Isaiah’s message to Jerusalem in exile is to repent and be restored, and this is in chapters 56 through 66.

Here we have, as we talked about last time, the Syro-Ephraimite coalition. I will not talk about the sign of Emmanuel again, but we have a word to Ahaz, who is the Davidite on the throne. It is about a child
who will be born. We have two things going on in Isaiah 7 and 8. There is the birth of Isaiah’s own son Mahershalalhashbaz, who in the first instance seems to be a fulfillment of this sign. Remember that Isaiah urged Ahaz the Davidite to ask for a sign himself, but Ahaz refused. We also have, beginning in Isaiah 9 through 11, this notion of a branch or a shoot of Jesse who will continue the Davidic covenant even though Ahaz is a poor embodiment of it. We have a promise for the future. Isaiah 9:6 says, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” We know that this has to do with the Davidite because of verse 7. “He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of Yahweh Almighty will accomplish this.” We have the fact that the Lord will use Assyria as an instrument of His judgment against Israel and Syria, the ones who wanted to form this coalition and swallow up Judah. The Lord will use Assyria, but Assyria is proud and violent. Assyria should not understand her victory and military success in terms of her own power and ability. The Lord is sovereign over her, so we see a judgment of woe against Assyria in Isaiah 10. Verse 12 says, “The LORD will punish the king of Assyria for his willful pride and his haughty look.” There is a warning to Assyria of God’s judgment, though she is the rod of His anger, as Isaiah 10:5 says.

A remnant of Israel and survivors of the house of Jacob will return, according to Isaiah. Judah must repent. She sees how Israel will be judged. Jerusalem, those who live in Zion, do not need to be afraid of the Assyrians, but they need to repent. In Isaiah 11 we have this wonderful passage picking up again on the promise to the Davidic household: “A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse and his roots; a branch will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of council and of power, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD, and his delight will be in the fear of the LORD.” It is that root of Jesse who will reclaim the remnant. Verse 11 says, “In that day the LORD will reach out his hand to reclaim the remnant that is left for his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia […] from all the other islands of the sea. He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel from the four corners of the earth.” This is a word of hope beyond judgment.

There are two things happening in Isaiah 1 through 39. There is a resounding, terrifying word of judgment against Israel and also against Jerusalem. It is the prosecution of a case against them for their cultic sins in going after other gods and for their social sins in not caring for the widow and the orphan. They are also so easy to be bribed. Yet at the same time there is hope that there will be a remnant that survives this judgment and hope that God is not through with the house of David. God has not gone back on His promise to David, but He will use the house of David in this restoration of His people. The reestablishment of Judah and Israel under a Davidic king begins in Isaiah 1 through 39. We see it in chapters 7, 9, and 11. We do not have to wait for Isaiah 40 and the servant songs to hear of these things. The servant songs will be important for elaborating this further.

The day of the Lord will not only come against His people, but it will come against the nations. We have a prophecy, not only against Assyria, but also against Babylon. Look at Isaiah 13 through 35, and you will see a series of pronouncements of oracles against the nations. Isaiah 13:9 says, “The day of the LORD is coming, a cruel day with wrath and anger to make the land desolate.” First there is a woe and oracle against Babylon, which follows on the heels of the woe against Assyria in Isaiah 10. Then we have this taunt against the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14. The pride and arrogance of the kings of Assyria and Babylon attracts the word of judgment from Isaiah, who represents the Lord of all the nations, not just the Lord of Israel and Judah. Isaiah 14:12 says, “How you have fallen from heaven, Morning Star, son of the Dawn! You have been cast to the earth and laid low, you who laid low the nations! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God. I will sit enthroned
on the mount of the assembly. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds. I will make myself like the Most High.’ But you were brought down to the grave, to the depths of the pit.” We see that this passage has to do with the king of Babylon. It has to do with the pride of the nations that the Lord will use as instruments of judgment against His people. Yet the Lord remains sovereign, and He speaks in judgment against them as well.

There is a note of fulfillment that we see right away in Isaiah 14:24-25, “Surely, as I have planned, so will it be, and as I have purposed, so will it stand. I will crush the Assyrian in my land; on my mountains I will trample him down. His yoke will be taken from my people. This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations […] For the Lord has purposed…” This prophecy was fulfilled in 612 BC when Babylon conquered Assyria.

In Isaiah 13 through 35 we have various oracles against the nations. Babylon is in chapters 13 and 14, and Assyria and Philistia are at the end of chapter 14. Moab is in Isaiah 15 and 16, and Damascus and the cities of Tyre and Sidon are in 23. Cush and Egypt are in Isaiah 18 through 20. In all of these the recurring theme throughout to Judah is that Yahweh, and not foreign alliances, will protect Jerusalem. Look at Isaiah 14:1-3 and notice what Isaiah says, “The LORD will have compassion on Jacob, once again he will choose Israel and settle them in their land, and aliens will join them and unite them with the house of Jacob. Nations will take them and bring them to their own place, and the house of Israel will possess the nations […] They will make captives of their captors and rule over their oppressors. On the day the LORD [Yahweh] gives you relief from suffering and turmoil and cruel bondage, you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon…” The message in all of these oracles of judgment against the nations that Isaiah says—not to the nations but to Jerusalem—is to place their confidence in Yahweh and not in realpolitik. They are not to place their confidence in alliances with foreign powers.

We should say a little bit about Egypt. That will be an important theme when we get to Jeremiah as well. Isaiah 20 is brief, “In the year that the supreme commander, sent by Sargon king of Assyria, came to Ashdod and attacked and captured it—at that time the LORD spoke through Isaiah son of Amoz. He said to him, ‘Take off the sackcloth from your body […]’ Then the LORD said, ‘Just as my servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush, so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles […] Those who trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt will be afraid and put to shame.’” This prophecy was fulfilled in 713 BC.

Isaiah 24 through 27 is a small section within this first big section in Isaiah, and this is what some people call the little apocalypse. The Lord’s focus shifts from individual nations and these oracles against the individual nations to the entire earth. Notice Isaiah 24:1-3 as an example, “See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth and devastate it. He will ruin its face and scatter its inhabitants. It will be the same for priest as for people, for master as for servant, for mistress as for maid, for seller as for buyer, for borrower as for lender, for debtor as for creditor. The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered. The LORD has spoken this word.” We see that the Lord will also renew the earth in Isaiah 24:16 and following, “From the ends of the earth we hear singing, glory to the Righteous One. But I said, ‘I waste away, I waste away. Woe to me!’” Isaiah again is overcome by the vision of judgment as the earth is broken up. Verse 21 says, “In that day the LORD will punish the powers in the heavens above.”

But we see this renewal in Isaiah 25, and we begin to see these visions of the eschatological renewal and banquet of feasting. Verse 6 talks about Jerusalem and Mount Zion, “On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine, the best of meats and
of finest wines, and on this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds the people, the sheet that covers all nations and swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces and remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth.”

We are to get that the destiny of the earth is bound up with the destiny of the people of God and Jerusalem. In other words, God will bring about His purpose to use His people as an instrument of salvation to declare His reign over the entire earth. That is what the message of Isaiah is ultimately about. We have to see that God’s people will first be judged. They must be renewed and repent and be brought back to the land. That return will be brought about by the Davidic leader and by the servant of the Lord whom we see in Isaiah 42, 49, and 52 through 53. There is a recurring theme of judgment on individual nations, and it is expanded to a vision of judgment on the entire earth. We see a renewal of the earth, and we get the picture that the destiny of the earth is bound up with the destiny of the people of God.

Before we leave this first section I should say something briefly about Hezekiah and Sennacherib. We have a section in Isaiah 36 through 39 that tells the story of Sennacherib’s threat against Jerusalem. We have his armies taunting Hezekiah and the leaders of Israel in Isaiah 36. They speak in the language of diplomacy at the time, the language of Aramaic. Isaiah 36:13 says, “The commander stood and called out in Hebrew, ‘Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! This is what the king says, ‘Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you. Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD when he says, ‘The Lord will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.’ Do not listen to Hezekiah. […] Do not let Hezekiah mislead you […]’” But the people remained silent and said nothing because the king had commanded, “Do not answer them.” Hezekiah responds by going into the temple of the Lord. He follows exactly what we read about in Chronicles about how faithful kings are supposed to enact the covenant. They are supposed to seek the Lord’s face and humble themselves. He goes before the Lord, and Isaiah tells him what to speak. We see that the Lord answers Hezekiah’s prayer, and He spares Jerusalem. The angel of the Lord takes part in the destruction of Sennacherib’s army.

We have a portent of bad things to come in Isaiah 38 and 39. Though the Lord spares Hezekiah, in his illness he receives envoys from Babylon in Isaiah 39. Hezekiah seeks to show and build some sense of alliance with Babylon. This will be his fatal downfall. Isaiah says to Hezekiah in Isaiah 39:5, “Hear the word of the LORD, ‘The time will surely come when everything in your palace and all that your fathers have stored up until this day will be carried off into Babylon. Nothing will be left,’ says the LORD.” So Isaiah in chapter 39 prophesies the fall of Jerusalem though he would not see it with his own eyes. There was a threat in 701 BC when Sennacherib came against Jerusalem. All the other fortified cities of Judah had been destroyed and were under Assyrian control. But the Lord spared Jerusalem for the time being.

Beginning in Isaiah 40 we see another vision of the heavenly council like we saw in Isaiah 6. The Lord calls again for someone to speak to Jerusalem. This time instead of words of judgment we have words of comfort. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed. Her sin has been paid for, and she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all of her sins. A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD. Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up; every mountain shall be made low. The rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it.’” We see this vision that the renewal of Israel will bring about the renewal of the earth. It will bring about a new heavens and a new earth, which Isaiah will talk about in chapters 65 and 66.

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In Isaiah 42, 49, and 52 through 53 we begin to see a primary instrument in the way in which the Lord will bring this renewal and redemption of Jerusalem about. This is through the Lord’s servant, or the evad Yahweh. In Isaiah 41 we see that the Lord’s servant is Israel. We see a corporate focus in verse 8, “But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend, I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant.’ I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

We see that in some sense Israel is the primary focus of who the Lord’s servant is. Yet as we begin to read further we begin to see that a prophet becomes distinguished from unfaithful Israel. Israel does not fulfill her role as the Lord’s servant, so she needs a representative who will be faithful. Isaiah 42 begins with this description, “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him. He will bring justice to the nations, and he will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break; a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice. He will not falter or be discouraged until he establishes justice on Earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.” Notice the shift from the corporate to the personal, or the individual, representative. This passage may recall to mind some things that we read in Isaiah 9 and 11. There is the language of putting God’s Spirit on someone. In Isaiah 11, regarding the branch of Jesse, God’s Spirit will be on him. Seven times we hear of the Spirit in different ways expressed through the branch of Jesse in Isaiah 11. In Isaiah 9 and 11 the focus of God’s rule was justice and righteousness and establishing that on the earth for all the nations. It is not just for Jerusalem and Judah.

The servant Israel, now with a representative or individual, is to be a light to the nations. Look at Isaiah 49 where we have another passage that speaks about the servant. Isaiah 49:1 and following says, “Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations. Before I was born the LORD called me. From my birth he made mention of my name. 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. He said to me, ‘You are my servant Israel in whom I will display my splendor.’ But I said, ‘I have labored to no purpose. I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD’s hand, and my reward is with my God.” Notice again the focus on Israel, but in verse 6 the focus shifts to the individual who will restore the tribes of Jacob. We have interplay in the servant language in that the servant is a representative of Israel in her role to restore the tribes of Jacob because she was unfaithful. Verse 6 says, “But also I will make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth. In the time of my favor I will answer you. In the day of salvation I will help you. I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people.”

The idea of being a covenant for the people is picked up in Isaiah 52 and 53. We are very familiar with the suffering servant in Isaiah 52. Notice the language of Isaiah 53:2, “He grew up before him like a tender shoot, like a root out of the dry ground.” We are supposed to get the connection to the root of Jesse here. All too infrequently this is brought out, but in the servant songs we see an interweaving of the expectations about the root of Jesse with this servant figure of Isaiah 42, 49, and 52 through 53.

A good memory verse for Isaiah is Isaiah 53:4-5. This is a very familiar passage. Let us start with Isaiah 53:10, “Yet it was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer. And though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days and the hand of the LORD will prosper in his hand. For he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors.” This is the idea of being a covenant, being made the fulfillment of this covenant. This language of covenant is picked up and spread throughout Isaiah 40 through 59. We see it in Isaiah 54:9-10. This time of judgment has happened, and people have been taken off into exile. The Lord foresees a day of return and
renewal of all things through the agency of this servant. We see again the language of the covenant of peace. Verses 9 and 10 say, “‘Now I have sworn not to be angry with you and never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,’ says the LORD who has compassion upon you.” We see in Isaiah 55:3 that this covenant “through my faithful love promised to David” is an everlasting covenant. “I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.” The Lord will renew everything through the purification and renewal of His people Israel.

In Isaiah’s final vision to the people in exile we see the idea of a renewed Jerusalem. We have the notion of a light to the nations that Israel is to be. We have hints at the servant figure extending into Isaiah 61. Verse 1 says, “Again the Spirit of the sovereign LORD is upon me and he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor and sent me to bind up the broken hearted.” This is the passage that Jesus picks up on in Luke 4. Notice that there is a shift from “I” back to the third person and the corporate sense of this servant and what he should do. Isaiah 61:4 says that they will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated. They will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. The representative, the servant, the Spirit-anointed Davidite and servant of the Lord represents Israel herself, the people of God and the vocation they themselves are to take on. This is to extend this renewal to the nations, to display as a light to the nations the reign of Yahweh, Israel’s God.

In Isaiah 65 we see the language of the new heavens and the new earth. Isaiah 65:17 says, “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people. The sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.” What begins is this incredible picture of Israel full of whelps and wounds and open sores in Isaiah 1. She is completely unsound in her body and an unfaithful harlot. The book ends with this incredible, beautiful picture of the New Jerusalem as an instrument of light and a renewal of the heavens and the earth through the agency of the servant of the Lord.

We need to talk about Jeremiah, but it is hard to talk about. It is hard to read, and it is hard to preach. It is just so full of bad news. Jeremiah is called the weeping prophet for a reason. First we have Isaiah’s 50-year ministry, then about a 40-year ministry in terms of Jeremiah. Jeremiah began his ministry during the time of Josiah and the reforms under Josiah. In Jeremiah 3 we see that these reforms do not go far enough. Jeremiah 3:6 says,

During the reign of King Josiah the LORD said to me, “I have seen what faithless Israel has done. She has gone up on every hill, under every spreading tree, and committed adultery there. I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not. And her unfaithful sister Judah saw it. I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of her adulteries, yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear. She also went out and committed adultery because Israel’s immorality mattered so little to her. She defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. In spite of all this her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart but only in pretense,” declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 3:10 makes it clear through Jeremiah that the reforms under Josiah that we read about in 2 Kings did not go far enough. They were not thorough-going. They were only primarily external. Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 3:11 and following, “‘Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the Lord […] ‘Return, faithless people, for I am your husband […] Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding. […] Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding.’” We read in Jeremiah 2 that their sins were twofold. Verse 13 says, “They have forsaken
me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

We see that they go after other gods and commit adultery with other gods. Judah witnesses the fall of Israel, but she does not repent. She too goes after other gods. Jeremiah, even more so than Isaiah, is a word of judgment against Jerusalem and Judah.

We see that Jeremiah is told not to marry or to father children because things are so bad. Jeremiah 16:1-4 tells the horrifying story of dead bodies everywhere and of mothers eating their children. We get graphic images from the eyewitness. Jeremiah is an eyewitness to the siege and fall of Jerusalem. He sees it with his own eyes, and Jeremiah is carried off against his will at the end of the book to Egypt into exile and dies there. He is the eyewitness to these horrific events. All throughout we will read some of Jeremiah’s laments against the Lord and this terrible commission that he has that is primarily to bring a word of judgment against the people.

If you turn to Jeremiah 4, notice that we have this call for repentance. “Return, faithless people,” is what we read in Jeremiah 3. Jeremiah 4:1 and following says, “If you will return, O Israel, return to me […] Circumcise yourselves to the Lord…” But something happens in verse 5. Though there is a time of calling to repentance, we begin to see that most of Jeremiah is about the fact that it is too late. Renewal will only come after siege and exile. We read in Jeremiah 4:5, “Announce in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem, sound the trumpet through the land, raise the signal. I am bringing disaster from the north […] A lion has come out of his lair; a destroyer of nations has set out. […] ‘In that day,’ declares the L ORD, the king and the officials will lose heart, the priests will be horrified, and the prophets will be appalled.” We have a pronouncement of judgment here. Jeremiah 5:3 says, “They made their faces harder than stone, and they refused to repent.” Instead of soft, circumcised hearts we have now a picture of the response of the people with hardened faces. Later we will see that that imagery of hardened iron will be an instrument of punishment and judgment against the people.

The corruption is thorough-going, not only to the people but also to their leaders. In Jeremiah 7 and 8 we see that the corruption extends to the priests and prophets. “The bones of the kings and the officials of Judah, the bones of the priests and the prophets, the bones of the people will be removed from their graves. They will be exposed to the sun and the moon and all the stars of heaven, which they loved and which they served.” This refers to the worship of Malak and the worship of the gods of the stars. The judgment is a horrific picture. In the law it is even forbidden to touch a corpse. What will happen is that even the graves of the priests, kings, and prophets will be opened up. It is a terrible picture of thorough-going corruption on the one hand, even to those who should represent the covenant to the people. There is thorough-going judgment on the other hand.

We get a word in Jeremiah 11 of what this is all about. The end of Jeremiah 9 says, “Israel is uncircumcised in heart.” In Jeremiah 10 it says, “Listen to the terms of the covenant. Tell them to the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem.” Jerusalem is the focus of Jeremiah’s prophecy. Jeremiah 11 says, “…Cursed is the man who does not obey the terms of this covenant—the terms I commanded your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.’ I said, ‘Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God. […]’ But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubbornness of their evil hearts. So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that they did not keep. […] Both the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken the covenant I made with their forefathers. Therefore this is what the LORD says: ‘I will bring on them a disaster that they cannot escape…”’ Jeremiah uses words right out of Deuteronomy. He represents the covenant and announces the curses of the covenant against the people. God tells Jeremiah in verse 14, “Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them because I will not listen.” Can you imagine this kind of
ministry? Can you imagine that your responsibility is to announce to the people of God that judgment is coming, and the time for repentance is past? This judgment will be thorough-going and severe because of how corrupt they have become. No one wants to hear that, so we see these incredible images later of Jehoiakim threatening to kill Jeremiah. We also see false priests and prophets put him in the pit and threaten his life. No wonder Jeremiah complains all throughout the book.

The end of Jeremiah 11 and beginning of Jeremiah 12 are good examples of these confessions and laments that we read from Jeremiah. We also see them in chapters 15, 17, 18, and 20. Look at Jeremiah 15 at how the Lord comforts Jeremiah in his lamentable ministry. Verse 10 says, “Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth, a man with whom the whole land strives and contends! I have neither lent nor borrowed yet everyone curses me. And the LORD said, ‘Surely I will deliver you for a good purpose. Surely I will make your enemies plead with you in times of disaster and times of distress. Can a man break iron, iron from the north or bronze? Your wealth and your treasures I will give as plunder without charge because of all of your sins throughout your country. I will enslave you to your enemies in a land you do not know.’” This is the Lord’s word of judgment against them. Verse 15 says, “You understand, O LORD. Remember me and care for me. Avenge me on my persecutors.” The Lord comforts Jeremiah in verse 20 and says, “I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue you and to save you.” These words and this notion that he will be a wall of bronze comes explicitly from Jeremiah’s own calling in Jeremiah 1:17-19. The comfort is that he will be protected and not overcome, but it is a bittersweet comfort. He is told that he will be able to withstand the repeated attacks that will keep coming against him. Judgment is certain, and Jeremiah laments his situation. The Lord reassures him that He will sustain him in all of this.

Let us go over the purpose and outline for Jeremiah. The purpose is to explain to the exilic community, those who have been carried off in judgment, that God’s severe punishment is because of the great sins of kings, priests, false prophets, and people who broke the covenant with God. Upon repentance in 70 years God will return them to Judah and establish a new covenant. We have Jeremiah’s warning against Judah, and he delivers God’s judgments against Judah’s leaders. Jerusalem is subject to God’s word of judgment and hope. Within this we have Jeremiah 30 through 33, which is a book of comfort. Toward the end of the book is Jerusalem’s fall and its implications for the nations.

Notice how the people and the leaders respond to Jeremiah’s warning in Jeremiah 7. Time and again in Jeremiah 7, 14, and 26 the Lord tells Jeremiah to go and stand in the gates between the gate of Jerusalem and the temple where people should come on pilgrimage to the festivals. Jeremiah 7 and 26 go together regarding Jeremiah’s sermon in Jerusalem. You probably noticed that Jeremiah is not laid out chronologically, but it is laid out thematically. We jump back and forth between the different kings who end the final years of reign in Jerusalem. Jeremiah 7:1 says,

Stand at the gate of the LORD’s house and proclaim this message, “Hear the word of the LORD all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says, ‘Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.” If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless, or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place and do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers.’”

They steal, they murder, and the judges and officials do not listen to the complaints of widows and those
whose property has unjustly been taken from them. The response of the leaders and the people is to shield themselves behind the Davidic covenant that God will preserve the temple. They know that God will preserve the temple and not let Jerusalem fall. Yet they have disintegrated and disentangled the Davidic covenant from the Mosaic. They have said, “The temple of the Lord.” It is their magical place, and God will protect it because He said He would. They did that without fulfilling the requirements of the Sinaiatic covenant. We see corrosive, thoroughly corrupt cultic and social sin. We see them on the cultic side going after other gods. We see them on the social side oppressing the poor, the weak, and those they should protect. We see that Jeremiah’s critique is to call them to repentance first and then to prosecute them on the basis of the Sinaiatic covenant.

The question is what happens to the Davidic covenant? Is God finished with David? Josiah is killed in battle against Pharaoh Neco. Jehoahaz or Shallum, as he is called in Jeremiah 22, is king for only three months. Then he is deported to Egypt, where he dies. Notice what Jeremiah says about Shallum in Jeremiah 22:11, “For this is what the L ORD says about Shallum son of Josiah, who succeeded his father, king of Judah, but has gone from this place: ‘He will never return. He will die in the place where they have led him captive; he will not see this land again.’” He has good words for his father Josiah in verses 15 and 16 because he defended the cause of the poor and the needy. Notice what he says about these other Davidic kings in Jeremiah 22:18 and 24, “This is what the L ORD says about Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, king of Judah, ‘They will not mourn for him […] He will have the burial of a donkey—dragged away and thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem. […] I warned you when you felt secure, but you said, “I will not listen!” […] ‘As surely as I live,’ declares the Lord, ‘even if you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull you off. I will hand you over to those who seek your life, those you fear—to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon […] You will never come back to the land you long to return to.’” Remember Jehoiakim is the one who later threatens to kill Jeremiah. Jehoiachin reigns for three months after Jehoiakim, and then he is deported in 597 BC along with Ezekiel, and his uncle Zedekiah is appointed by Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah refuses to pay tribute, and Nebuchadnezzar brings about the destruction of Jerusalem.

Notice that right away in Jeremiah 23 we have him saying something really important. He answers the question of whether God is finished with David. It seems in Jeremiah 22 with all of these unfaithful Davidites that God is finished with David. But we see in Jeremiah 23 that this is not true. Verse 5 says, “The days are coming when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called, the L ORD Our Righteousness.” That is a poke at Zedekiah, whose name is supposed to mean “the Lord Our Righteousness.”

Let us end our discussion of Jeremiah by looking at a word of comfort that comes in Jeremiah 29 and 31. In Jeremiah 29 we have a letter to those who are carried off at the time of Jehoiachin’s deportation. Several people are carried off at that time. Shallum is deported to Egypt, and then Nebuchadnezzar defeats Egypt and punishes Jehoiachin by deporting important leaders, including Daniel, in the first deportation. Then a year later a second deportation takes place. Let us talk about what the people who are deported are to think and do. Jeremiah sends a letter to them in Jeremiah 29:4 and following, “This is what the L ORD Almighty, the L ORD God of Israel says to those I carried into exile into Babylon: Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters. Find wives for your sons and daughters in marriage so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the L ORD for it because if it prospers you too will prosper.” In verse 10 the Lord says, “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. I know the plans that I have for you, declares the
LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.” The significance of seventy years is that the people Jeremiah wrote the letter to will not come back. Their descendants will come back. “Be faithful. Be a blessing to the city. You will not come back, but your descendants will.”

Jeremiah 31:31-33 is the restoration of Israel. They will be brought back to the land. Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 30:9, “They will serve the LORD their God and David their king.” We see in Jeremiah 31:27, “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will plant the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear them down and to overthrow them, I will watch over them to build them up and to plant them.” These are words straight out of the beginning of Jeremiah’s commission in chapter 1. Jeremiah 31:31 says, “‘The time is coming,’ says the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt because they broke my covenant. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD: ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” because they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.’ This is what the LORD says.” Just like the corruption had been thorough-going from the servant to the king, now the knowledge of the Lord will be thorough-going among the renewed people.

There is a glimmer of hope that even though things are horrific and even though we read the horrifying tale of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, we see the prophet and representative of the Lord so mistreated and maltreated, and others try to announce people when he announces judgment. Nevertheless there is a word of hope through that prophet for those being deported that the Lord will bring their descendants back to the land under a Davidic king. He will renew His covenant with them, and He will forgive their sin.