

ABRAHAM WHO MADE AN UNQUALIFIED COMMITMENT

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"And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and land the lad will go yonder and worship, and will come again to you" (Gen. 22:5).

Abraham was deep in thought; he was facing the greatest crisis of his life. He had been instructed by the Lord to offer Isaac as a sacrifice upon Mount Moriah, but the more he considered the command, the greater became his problem. Nothing made sense! Isaac, his beloved son, had become the center around which life revolved and upon whom the future depended. The boy's presence made life worthwhile; he was his mother's pride and joy. The thought of offering him as a sacrifice was totally obnoxious and senseless. Yet God had commanded this, and Abraham was obliged to make a choice: either to do as commanded or to refuse cooperation with the Lord. He was at an impasse.

A Test of His Feelings

Obviously, he had to decide who came first in his affections—God or Isaac. There were various ways to consider the problem. If he refused to obey God, then Isaac could die just as easily as he had been born. His birth had been a miracle, but his death could be swift. In that event, having disobeyed God, Abraham would be left alone. He loved his son immensely, but nothing could change the fact he loved the Lord even more. God's command had shocked him, for it was unnatural to expect a father to kill his only child; when Abraham reflected on the matter, his conclusion was inevitable. The Lord was not foolish; there had to be a reason for His command. "And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and gave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him" (Gen. 22:3).

A Test of His Faith

During that journey he had time to reflect. He remembered the domestic strife between Sarah, his wife, and Hagar, the servant. At that time God had said, "In all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Gen. 21:12). The old man seemed to be in a trance! His thoughts

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continued, "How can my seed be multiplied in Isaac if he dies as a child? Even the Lord cannot raise children from a corpse! Yet God cannot lie. Nothing seems to make sense, but if God is to bless and honor my name through Isaac, even though the lad be offered in sacrifice, it will be incumbent upon the Lord to restore his life." When Abraham reached the place where his servants were to remain, his problem had been solved. He told them to wait, and promised that when their mission had been completed, he and his son would return. That was a special promise, for at that moment he believed Isaac would be slain. Centuries later it was written, "By faith, Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure" (Heb. 11:17-19). That father never hesitated to take the knife; he knew that Isaac, even if he were slain, would be raised from the dead; otherwise the Lord would be a liar.

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A Test of His Fellowship

Abraham was already a son of God by the creative process, but he became known as "the friend of God" (see James 2:23, and 2 Chron. 20:7). Which was the more valuable relationship—to be a child of God or His close friend? A son is related by nature to his parent, but fellowship between parent and child can sometimes be mined. Close friends are seldom separated except by distance; each desires and enjoys the company of the other. There was never strain between God and His intimate friend. Perhaps there were times when Abraham found it difficult to understand why the Lord took a certain course of action, but when faith was tested, trust remembered God's promises. If it were possible to see Abraham's face when he took the knife to slay his son, the picture would be informative. Expectancy shone in the eyes of the old man; he never thought of blood streaming from a wound but considered only the power of resurrection raising his boy. He carried a knife but not a shovel! There would be no need to dig a grave; the boy would still be alive!

The promises of God are lifelines in stormy seas, a sure foundation upon which to build, a safe and true guide when life's highways are obscured by fog! God has never broken a promise; to rely upon His faithfulness is to exhibit wisdom.

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THE PROMISE THAT HELPED JOSHUA FILL BIG SHOES

"There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee" (Josh. 1:5).

To follow in the footsteps of Moses and become the new leader of Israel was not an easy task. The patriarch had spent forty years studying the military prowess of Pharaoh's army and another forty years exercising the patience and ability of a shepherd in the wilderness. He needed eighty years of intensive training before he became the leader of God's difficult people. They had been ungrateful, unworthy, and unsurpassed in their criticism, and it remained a mystery how Moses tolerated the people who made his life a misery. The patriarch had been an intimate friend of the Lord, but the time had arrived for another man to lead the nation. Joshua had been chosen by God to lead Israel into the Promised Land, and to his everlasting credit it can be said he did a magnificent job.

An Unfailing God... A Command to Obey

Joshua received special training for his assignment. Nearly forty years earlier he had been one of the spies sent to gain information about the Promised Land, and he probably had vivid recollections of that eventful journey. It is believed by theologians that as a slave in Egypt, he was trained in Pharaoh's army and was later responsible for organizing a group of slaves into a disciplined group of warriors. When Moses prayed for help to overcome the Amalekites, Joshua led Israel against the enemy. Afterward, God instructed the patriarch to ordain publicly his chief minister, so the entire nation would be aware of the authority bestowed upon the new leader (see Num. 27:18-23).

Joshua was a seasoned warrior, an able administrator, and a saint filled with the Holy Spirit. When God commanded him to take Israel into Canaan, he was ready for the gigantic task. It was significant that the command, "Be strong and of a good courage" was given three times, and each had special significance. Joshua was urged to be strong for the sake of the land, the law, and the Lord.

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The reason for his bravery would be the abiding presence of the Lord. He would never be alone. The same promises can be claimed by every Christian worker who has a Canaan to conquer.

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An Unwavering Guide... A Challenge to Succeed

"This book of the Law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success" (Josh. 1:8). Evidently, Moses had committed to writing all that the Lord told him on the mountain. Joshua was present when God met with Moses, but a written record of what transpired would prevent forgetfulness. God had spoken, and He meant what He said! Without the strength of God's abiding presence, even the greatest military effort would fail. To govern and inspire the nation, Joshua would be asked to overcome innumerable difficulties. Civil and judicial problems would require attention; judgments would have to be made. Whatever was decided, some critics would complain of harsh treatment. Some of the people had been hostile toward Moses; they had not changed! The Scriptures were to be an infallible guide to the man who would read them daily.

An Unseen General... A Companion to Share

"And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho . . . there stood a man over against him with his drawn sword in his hand: and Joshua went unto him, and said unto him, Art thou for us, or for our

adversaries? And he said, Nay, but as captain of the host of the Lord am I now come... And the captain of the Lord's host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy. And Joshua did so" (Josh. 5: 1-15). It was not permitted in Israel to worship any god but the Lord. Even angels rebuked those who mistakenly fell at their feet (see Rev. 22:89).

The fact that Joshua was permitted to worship and instructed to remove his sandal indicates that the Lord Jesus had come to earth to be the commander-in-chief of Israel's army. God never sent His servant to fight alone; He delighted in sharing the joys and problems of His people. As the eternal Word came to be with Joshua, so the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost to reside with and in Christians. The Captain of God's host was never seen again, but that was of no consequence. Joshua knew when the Lord was near—he knew His voice!

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JOSHUA AND THE PROMISE
THAT STOPPED A RIVER

"And Joshua said, Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you... it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests that bear the ark of the Lord, the Throd of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of Jordan, that the waters of Jordan shall be cut off from the waters that come down from above; and they shall stand upon an heap" (Josh. 3:1-13).

This obscure story in the book of Joshua has become one of the most challenged of all the Bible incidents. It describes how the

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waters of the flooded Jordan river were held back to provide a safe and dry crossing as the children of Israel entered Canaan. Theologians disagree in their interpretation of the account. Some deny its accuracy, stating it never happened. Others supply details suggesting the phenomenon was caused by an earthquake. Christians believe it was a miracle, the fulfillment of a very important promise.

The Significant Promise... Illustrated

It should be remembered that on that significant day much more was at stake than the crossing of a river. A new leader had arrived to take charge of the nation, and inevitably, some people would challenge his authority. Believing Moses was the ultimate in state-manship, they would be reluctant to obey his successor. God had said, "As I was with Moses, so will I be with thee," but something more was needed. Israel had to be convinced that God meant what He said. The crossing of the Jordan was the first test to be undertaken. When the Hebrews left Egypt, God assisted the Exodus by dividing the Red Sea (see Ex. 14:21-22). If God were to fulfill the promise made to Joshua, then it would be necessary to repeat His action. When the children of Israel saw the miraculous drying of the river, they remembered what God had promised, and their respect for Joshua increased.

The Special Power... Influencing

"The waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon a heap very far from the city of Adam, that is beside Zaretan: and those that came down toward the sea of the plain, even the salt sea, failed, and were cut off: and the people passed over right against Jericho" (Josh. 3:16). How could this sensational event occur? Many

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insist that this was no miracle since the event can be explained as a natural phenomenon. They point out that on December 8, 1267, an earthquake caused the high banks of the Jordan to collapse near Tell ed-Damiyeh, damming the river for about 10 hours. On July 11, 1927, another earthquake near the same location blocked the river for 21 hours. Of course these stoppages did not occur during flood season. Admittedly, God could have employed natural causes such as an earthquake and a landslide, but the timing would have still made it a miraculous intervention. Does the biblical text allow for such an interpretation of this event? Considering all the factors involved, it seems best to view this occurrence as a "special act of God brought about in a way unknown to man" (The Bible Knowledge Commentary on the Old Testament~ p. 335, Walvoord and Zuck, Victor Books). Joshua said the event took place when the river Jordan was overflowing its banks. Only a cataclysmic event could have held back raging flood waters, and this became obvious to the people who might have discredited Joshua's authority.

The Stony Indicating

The priests who walked by faith into the river were to be commended for their action. Men of lesser stature might have feared death by drowning. Nothing happened until the feet of the priests

were actually in the water. "And as . . . the feet of the priests.. were dipped in the brim of the water... that the waters which came down from above, stood and rose up upon an heap" (Josh. 3:15,16). "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). It is the key which unlocks the treasure house of heaven. The ten lepers cleansed by the Savior only experienced deliverance when they also walked by faith. "And it came to pass,

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that, as they went, they were cleansed" (Luke 17:14). Joshua erected two memorial pillars of stone, one in the bed of the river and the other on its bank. They were meant to remind the people they were leaving a carnal wilderness experience to seek a new, triumphant life in God's land of milk and honey.

Got any rivers you think are uncrossable?
Got any mountains you can't tunnel through?
God specializes in things thought impossible;
He can do things no other can do.

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THE PROMISES THAT MADE DAVID SIT DOWN

"According to all these words, and according to all this vision, so did Nathan speak to David. Then went king David in, and sat before the LORD" (2 Sam. 7:17-18).

The palace on Mount Zion had been completed; Jerusalem was at rest and David was dreaming. When he toured his luxurious home, his heart filled with pride, but his conscience was troubled. He compared his magnificent house with the inconspicuous tent in which the ark of the covenant resided and regretted that he lived in splendor when God was behind curtains! The more he considered the problem, the greater became his determination. He would build a temple for the Lord, and it would be the greatest structure in the world! When he shared his thoughts with Nathan, the prophet was delighted and said, "Go, do all that is in thine heart; for the Lord is with thee" (2 Sam 7:3). That night sleep was elusive; David lay awake planning how to complete his task. The temple would be vast in extent, exceedingly beautiful, and even the Lord would be proud of it. But David's dreams were never realized; the Lord had different ideas.

Sitting Before the Lord... A Cure for Great Disappointment

"And it came to pass that night that the word of the LORD came unto Nathan, saying, Go and tell my servant David, Thus saith the Lord... when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee... and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever." (2 Sam 7:45, 12-13). Further information was supplied later. "And David said to Solomon, My son, as for me, it was in my mind to build an house unto the name of the Lord my God; But, the word of the Lord came to me, saying ... thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in my sight. Behold a son shall be born to thee... He shall build an house for my name" (1 Chron. 22:7-10). When disappointment fills the heart and chills the spirit, it is wise to sit at God's feet.

Sitting Before the Lord... A Cause for Growing Determination

David desired to build a house for God; the Lord planned to build a house for David. The king's disappointment began to diminish as he contemplated the details of God's message. His pouting

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was replaced by praise when he considered he would be given a son whose kingdom would never be destroyed. It is debatable whether David understood the implications of that great utterance, for evidently it would not be fulfilled during the lifetime of Solomon. The

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Davidic kingdom would last until the Messiah sat upon the throne of Israel. Suddenly, David smiled and made a vow. If he could not build the temple, he would prepare materials to assist his son who would do it for him. "And David said, Solomon my son is young and tender, and the house that is to be builded for the Lord must be exceeding magnificent, of fame and of glory throughout all countries. I will therefore now make preparation for it. So David prepared abundantly before his death" (1 Chron. 22:5). The king's cooperation became an asset of incalculable worth when Solomon began his reign. It was refreshing that God's blessing was more to be desired than anything else in the world. Many people who cannot be leaders in a project or the kingdom resign their position and withdraw. They prove they are smaller than the thing which upset them.

Sitting Before the Lord... A Cause for Glorious Devotion

"Then went David in and sat before the Lord. He probably knelt in the sanctuary and sat back on his heels. From that position it was easy to lean forward and place his forehead upon the floor.

David said, "Who am I, O Lord GOD? and what is my house, that thou hast brought me hitherto? . . . thou hast spoken also of thy servant's house for a great while to come" (2 Sam. 7:18-19). David knew he was unworthy of such honor, and his words expressed humility when he said, "For thy word's sake, and according to thine own heart, hast thou done all these great things, to make thy servant know them" (verse 21). When David sat in the presence of God, he would have appreciated the words of Frederick C. Maker:

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our lives the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.

It is wise to take burdens to the Lord, and leave them there.

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JOB, WHOSE PROMISE SHONE IN THE DARKNESS

"Behold, I go forward but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: On the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him: But he knoweth the way that I take; when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:~1()).

This statement made by Job was not exactly a promise; it was an affirmation of his faith. His world had been shattered. Friends insisted God had forsaken him, his family was dead, and his possessions were gone. The future remained bleak, yet in the darkness a light shone. He believed God and exclaimed, "When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold." Job was not a trained theologian. He was intensely human; every part of his life suffered except his faith. It is believed that Job was the first book of the Bible. If this view is correct, Job had no Scriptures to read and no prophets to whom he could go for advice. Job was one of the first saints to walk the earth. No sanctuary had been erected, and any knowledge gleaned from historical records was limited. Yet he communed with the Lord; his faith was mature, and although he failed to understand the reasons for the distressing circumstances, he believed God would

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help him to overcome.

The Ceaseless Annoyance... Frustrating

The account of the catastrophes that devastated the life and pwp~erty of Job chills the human spirit. Within a short space of time he went from success to failure, prosperity to poverty, and supreme happiness to misery. Yet those terrible events could not compare with the frustration that haunted his soul. It appeared that God had deliberately hidden Himself, that He was indifferent to His servant's predicament. As the initial text indicated, Job said, "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: On the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him; he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him." The distressed man looked in all directions hoping to find evidence of the Lord's compassion, but unfortunately, he searched in vain. He said, "I looked where he doth work," and that probably meant he remembered earlier places or circumstances when he had enjoyed fellowship with the Lord. Something had changed! God was no longer in the old haunts. He could not be dead, but was He offend-

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ed? Other people have endured similar crises. Any man can praise God in times of supreme happiness, but only saints glorify Him when problems appear to be insurmountable.

The Courageous Acceptance... Faithfulness

Job never blamed God, but one of his statements indicated the limitation of his knowledge. 'He said, "Why did I not die from the womb?... For now should I have lain still and been quiet... There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary be at rest" (see Job 3:11-17). His outlook was dismal. Death was the termination of existence. Therefore, it would be better to be dead than to remain alive suffering. Later in his experience that idea was challenged when he asked a very important question, "If a man die, shall he live again?" The value of the man's faith must be measured against the times in which he lived. He did not have the accumulated blessings of the Christian faith. He lived in a period when understanding of the Lord was limited. That enhanced the value of his testimony, "When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold." The patriarch did not understand the reason for his prolonged suffering, but his faith in the goodness of God remained unshaken. He believed that the Lord knew what was happening and seemed to be saying, "As long as God knows what He is doing, why should I

worry? Eventually, I shall come forth as gold."

The Complete Assurance... Fabulous

Even in his lifetime Job knew the method used to refine gold. He looked upon his experiences as fire controlled by God who desired to see His reflection in the character of the tested saint. The patriarch apparently was willing to accept the process so the Refiner could gain His objective. That he ultimately came forth as predicted is proof of his spirituality. Even his loyalty toward friends remained undamaged. "And the Lo~ turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends; also the Lo~ gave Job twice as much as he had before" (Job 42:10). The saint did not realize he was the object of a direct attack from the powers of evil. He endured, and God was proud of him. His testimony should encourage all Christians who feel the Lord is slow answering prayers. A light shining in darkness is far more effective than one shining in the daylight!

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ISAIAH'S PROMISE THAT POSTPONED A FUNERAL!

"Then came the word of the Lord to Isaiah, saying, Go, and say to Hezekiah, Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years" (Isa. 38:5).

The palace in Jerusalem was hushed; the musical instruments were silent. Hezekiah, the king, was gravely ill. Describing the scene Josephus wrote, "The physicians despaired of him, and expected no good issue of his sickness, as neither did his friends. And beside the distemper itself, there was a very melancholy circumstance that disordered the king, which was the consideration that he was childless, and was going to die, and leave his house and government without a successor of his own body" (Antiquities of the Jews, Book 10, chap. 2). Everyone believed Isaiah had made matters worse when he said to the king, "Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live" (1st 38:1). Afterward, the prophet returned to make the greatest promise Hezekiah ever heard. He claimed God had instructed him to say, "I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will add unto thy days fifteen years."

A Dangerous Malady... "Sick unto Death"

Hezekiah was one of the best of Israel's kings, and although occasionally unwise, he endeavored to please God. The sickness which threatened his life was evidently some kind of boil or carbuncle. It is interesting to note that Isaiah advised that a poultice of figs be applied to the inflamed area. That ancient remedy is still widely used to make boils come to a head. "Recently, archeologists dug up a Babylonian tablet which stated that if a physician cut into a boil, and the patient died, the physician had both his hands cut off. If the patient happened to be a slave, the physician's hands were spared, but he had to buy another slave for the owner of the patient. So the doctor had to be extremely careful when he lanced an abscess or a boil" (Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, vol. 2, page 134). Isaiah was not a doctor, but he was an intimate friend of "the Great Physician" from whom he received instructions.

A Disturbing Message... "Thou Shalt Surely Die"

The promise of an extended life was unconditional. However, it was not given until Hezekiah wept bitter tears and uttered his prayer

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before the throne of God. When people are complacent and indifferent, it becomes necessary for the Lord to bring them to their senses.

God's ability is limitless, but sometimes, to get the best from His children, He works "in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." It seemed strange that Hezekiah should give to the Babylonians an escorted tour through the temple (see Isa. 39:1-2). His indiscretion led to the fall of his kingdom and the subjugation of his people. He was wiser on what might have been his deathbed than when he welcomed pagan emissaries.

A Distraught Monarch... "And Hezekiah Wept Sore"

At this time Hezekiah had no children, and it appeared he was more concerned with fathering a successor than regaining his health. To understand this, it is necessary to remember that among eastern

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potentates, to die without producing an heir to the throne was considered a disgrace. Barren women were thought to be cursed by the Lord. Kings who did not produce a son were also believed to be rejected by God. Even today, eastern kings never hesitate to divorce wives who fail to produce a male child. To Hezekiah the threat of death was terrible, but the thought of dying childless was worse. He forgot that the kingdom of Israel was far more important to God than to any other person.

A Definite "I Will Add to Thy Days Fifteen Years"

The story of how God spoke to the prophet makes exciting reading. It is not difficult to visualize Isaiah's return to the distracted king. The calm dignity of God's servant contrasted with the pathetic appearance of the man who believed he was about to die. The physical recovery of Hezekiah was not a miracle; it was the result of the application of a poultice of figs which broke the abscess or boil. The extension of Hezekiah's life was a reminder that all life was controlled by the Almighty. When Daniel was threatened in Babylon, he solemnly said to king Belshazzar, "the God in whose hand thy breath is... hast thou not glorified" (Dan. 5:23).

The recovery of Hezekiah provided a glorious example of a truth enunciated by David. "For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly" (Ps. 84:11).

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ISAIAH, WHO BELIEVED THE KING WAS COMING

"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it" (Isa. 40:3-5).

Isaiah wrote a Bible within a Bible! His first section (chapters 1-39) resembles the Old Testament; the second part (chapters 40-66) suggests the New Testament at the heart of which is chapter 53, a clear account of the death of Christ (see the author's book, Bible Pinnacles, pages 75-76). Isaiah's fortieth chapter is therefore the commencement of his "New Testament," and it begins with the ministry of John the Baptist—"a voice crying in the wilderness. There are three interpretations of this Scripture, each with its promise of approaching royalty.

The Promise of a Great Deliverance

The statement "Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God," was a reference to the custom of sending workmen ahead of a king to do whatever was necessary to facilitate the king's progress. It was often necessary to repair roads and move hills of sand so that the visiting monarch could make a triumphant entry into a city. Using that illustration, Isaiah proclaimed God would visit the captives in Babylon and servitude would end. He urged the Hebrews to repair the highways of life that the Lord's progress would not be hindered. Jeremiah supplied additional details of that great event. He wrote, "For thus saith the LORD, that after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the

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Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you an expected end" (Jer. 29: 1-11). These Scriptures with their repeated promises indicated (a) God's grace was greater than Israel's sin, (b) God saw the end from the beginning and knew what He was doing, and (c) no difficulty was too great for the Lord to overcome. These facts, when accepted in faith, turn darkness into light, despair into liberation, and disappointment into laughter.

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The Promise of a Gracious Deliverer

Many years later John the Baptist used Isaiah's statement to inform listeners he was "the voice crying in the wilderness." He knew the King was approaching and urged everyone to prepare for His arrival (see Luke 3:36). The people were asked to remove obstacles from their highway of life. This was a vital part of John's message of repentance. Probably John was mindful of the astonishing effect of Christ's ministry. Valleys of depression would disappear as sufferers found new meaning in life. Mountains of difficulties would be removed, crooked lives made straight, and the roughest places in life made smooth. John quoted the text, "And all flesh shall see the salvation of God." People residing in Palestine were privileged to witness the healing power of Christ, but that hardly exhausted the meaning of the text, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God." It therefore becomes necessary to consider a third interpretation.

The Promise of a Glorious Domain

The text can never be completely fulfilled until the Lord returns to earth to establish His kingdom. Then the valleys will be exalted, and the high places will be made low when an earthquake divides the Mount of Olives. "And his feet shall stand in that day upon the

mount of Olives . . . and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south" (Zech. 14:4). The reign of Christ will provide unprecedented opportunities for witnessing the power of God, for "the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid... and a little child shall lead them" (Isa. 11:6).

This remarkable text touches every aspect of life; it embraces the past, present, and future. People who suffer in valleys of depression and others confronted by insurmountable obstacles find encouragement in the promises of Isaiah. Men and women who know the transforming power of Christ appreciate His ability to straighten crooked lives and smooth the rough places of life. Isaiah evidently believed it was wiser to consider the promises of God than to gaze dejectedly at the imprisoning walls of Babylon.

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ISAIAH, WHO DESCRIBED A DIVINE SHEPHERD

"Behold, the Lord GOD... He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young" (Isaiah 40:10-11).

The ancient prophets often referred to the Lord as "the Shepherd, a description that was easily understood by the Hebrews who had

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always raised sheep (see Gen. 46:31-47:3). Joseph was aware that shepherds were disliked by the Egyptians and was careful to avoid the displeasure of Pharaoh. When David contemplated accepting the challenge of Goliath, he informed Saul of exploits performed during his stay with the sheep on the hills of Bethlehem (see 1 Sam. 17:34-35). Centuries later, when the Savior addressed His followers, He said, "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (see John 10:11). Isaiah's statement supplied three wonderful word pictures.

The Shepherd Leading... A Great Provision

"He shall feed his flock like a shepherd." Throughout the Middle East shepherds live with their sheep; they are never separated. The flock follows the leader and each day is led to places where pasture is available. He knows them individually, and they respond to his voice. Isaiah's conception of the loving kindness of the Lord was unsurpassed. Life could resemble a wilderness where sometimes sustenance was hard to find. It was the shepherd's duty to seek green pasture and still waters. The animals were never required to find grass, but they were expected to follow their guide. The Lord knew the terrain, and was an expert at finding pasture for His people.

The Shepherd A Gracious Protection

"He shall carry the lambs with his arm" When newborn lambs could not travel as quickly as the rest of the flock, the shepherd lifted and cradled them in his arms. If they became exhausted with travel, he held them close to his heart. This supplied urgently needed protection. Every person who heard Isaiah's message could instantly visualize the scene. The inference that the Creator of the universe could be as tender as a boy who loved the lambs and led the flock was something difficult to comprehend. The Lord was not exclusively the stern and terrifying God whose presence made Mount Sinai tremble. Nei

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ther was He the devouring fire which threatened the existence of rebellious sinners. He was a God filled with compassion, a Heavenly Father who cared for His people. Perfect love for Him banished fear. The folk who trusted Him were never hungry!

The Shepherd Loving... A Glorious Perception

"And shall gently lead those that are with young." Sheep with special needs required added attention. Ewes giving suck to their offspring can become easy prey for predators. Wise shepherds gave instant attention to the mother sheep who in helping their young increased their own danger. During the lambing season in Western Australia, I often accompanied my host at midnight when the foxes tried to kill defenseless ewes. I did not realize until then the constant danger of sheep when they gave birth. That the Lord Jesus Christ should identify Himself as the Good Shepherd suggested that all the tendencies of a faithful shepherd would be evident in His care for men and women. His elderly sheep would neither be forsaken nor abandoned.

This text resembles the meat in a sandwich; it is between two expressions of the amazing power of the Lord. Isaiah said in verse 10, "Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him. Then in verse 12, the prophet asked a very

important question, "Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in

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scales, and the hills in a balance?" The emphasis was upon the strong arm of the Almighty. God held the oceans in the palm of His hand; His reach encompassed the heavens, and with ease He lifted mountains and weighed them as in a scales. Even the greatest things in creation were as toys in the Lord's hand. Between these two statements Isaiah mentioned the ministry of the divine Shepherd. The hand that held mountains would hold and protect the lambs. That which held the seas controlled every wave of circumstance which threatened the welfare of God's sheep. George C. Stebbins wrote:

O soul tossed on the billows
Afar from a friendly land,
Look up to Him who holds thee
"Th the hollow of His hand."

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ISAIAH'S CLUSTER OF STARS

"But now thus saith the Lord . . . I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name"; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee" (Isa. 43:1-2).

If baseball terminology were used to describe this text, then it touched all bases! It was one of the most majestic utterances ever made by the prophet. His collection of verses suggests a cluster of brilliant stars shining against the dark sky of human failure. It hardly needs an expositor. If Isaiah's writings were likened to a mountain range, this would be one of its highest peaks. Three glorious plateaus invite investigation.

Love Abounding... How Undeserved

"I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine." This was truth in triplicate! It was all the more remarkable because earlier chapters of the book described a decadent nation. The Jews had forgotten and forsaken the Lord and ignored the appeal with which the prophet commenced his message. God said, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa 1:18). Unfortunately, the Lord's entreaty had been ignored; Israel continued to displease God. Their defiance of God's commandments and the continuing idolatry ruined their happiness. Their bondage in Babylon was thoroughly deserved. That the Lord could love such wayward people was hard to understand and impossible to explain. The poet expressed similar thoughts in his lines:

How Thou canst think so well of us;
And be the God Thou art:
Is darkness to my intellect,
But sunshine to my heart.

The Lord had redeemed Israel from Egypt and identified Himself with the nation which became His prized possession. The Jews enjoyed a special place among the nations. Christians can also claim the same privilege, for through the death of Christ redemption has been made possible. Believers may now address the Lord as "Heaven

ly Father." Their names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Redeemed sinners are the Lord's treasures. He bought us, He values us, and He protects us (see Mal. 3:17).

Love Assuring... How Unlimited

"When thou passeth through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee." God never promised immunity from troubled waters. He said when rivers of difficulty were reached, sufficient strength would be provided to enable Israel to cross safely to the other side. God realized that ahead of His people were all kinds of problems which might threaten to sweep them away. Disaster would always be averted because He would hold back the waters - 'they shall not overflow thee.'

If the children of Israel never encountered "floods of difficulty," they would not have graduated from the school of experience. God often taught greater lessons in the river bed than He ever did on its banks! If the disciples of Jesus had not sailed through the storm on the Sea of Galilee, they would not have known the extent of Christ's ability to help them. That truth is demonstrated throughout the Scriptures. "When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee." The Hebrew boys who

were thrown into Nebuchadnezzar's fire would have appreciated this wonderful text (see Dan. 3:22-25).

Love Abiding... How Unsurpassed

"Fear not for I am with thee:... Behold I will do a new thing... I give waters in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert, to give drink to my people, my chosen" (Isa. 43:5, 19,20). There was a definite sense in which these promises applied to the Hebrews, but since the promises of God are "Yea and Amen" in Christ, every Christian may discover continuing comfort in these announcements. The change from the tone of earlier statements was truly astonishing. Delitzsch, the German commentator, correctly said, "The sudden change from reproach to consolation was very significant. It gave them to understand that no meritorious work of their own would come in between what Israel was, and what it was to be... It was God's free grace which came to meet the need" (Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. 7, page 2). The grace of God is an unfathomable ocean; without it, life would be impossible and the world a desert.

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THE PROMISE OF TREASURES IN THE DARKNESS

"Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden... I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the LORD, which call thee by thy name' am the God of Israel" (Isa. 45:1-3).

This remarkable text mentions the only pagan king said to be the anointed of the Lord. The time of Israel's captivity in Babylon had seemed endless. The Lord, who saw the end from the beginning, predicted His anointed helper, the king of Persia, would overthrow the Babylon dynasty and liberate the enslaved Jews. Ultimately, the monarch heard how the God of heaven had predicted his victory, and this increased his determination to assist the unfortunate captives.

Isaiah's statement was exceptionally interesting. A heathen monarch had been chosen to aid the slaves. Did the Lord choose

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Cyrus because Hebrew deliverers were unavailable, or was the stranger given the assignment to indicate Gentiles were not beyond the reach of God's influence?

The "gates of brass, bars of iron, and the treasures of darkness" were unmistakable references to Babylon. The city had one hundred gates thought to have been made of wood, overlaid with brass. The gate posts were reinforced with iron. The accumulated wealth of the empire was stored in windowless vaults, and a second city named Sardes was the Fort Knox of Asia. It has been estimated that Cyrus confiscated treasure in excess of one hundred million dollars. Aware of God's help, he liberated the slaves, and thereby fulfilled the prediction made by Isaiah (see 2 Chron. 36:22-23). The promise regarding the treasures of darkness becomes even more instructive when applied to other areas of Scripture.

The Treasure of Indestructible Happiness (Acts 16:25)

It was very dark within the prison at Philippi; most of the prisoners were asleep. The events of the day had been frightening, and even the criminals were aware of the new men who had arrived bleeding and bruised. The inmates speculated as to the reason for their incarceration, and some of them might have assisted the suffering strangers. "And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them." It was unbelievable, and even the official who rushed into the prison failed to

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comprehend what had happened. These men possessed joy which shone in darkness.

The Treasure of Inspiring Help (Matthew 14:22-33)

Money is one of the most valuable commodities in the world, but some of the most essential things in life cannot be purchased. The disciples had often endured storms on the Sea of Galilee but on this occasion were more afraid of the Man who walked on the water. "The ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with the waves: for the wind was contrary. And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled." That terrifying experience in predawn darkness taught invaluable lessons: (a) Christ was greater than any storm; (b) No storm could endanger the life of a trusting soul as long as he obeyed his Lord; and (c) No storm could sink a ship if Christ were in it.

The Treasure of an Increasing Hope (Job 23:10)

The tragic yet triumphant story of Job's sufferings is probably one of the best known accounts in the Bible. The patriarch had won the respect of his fellow-citizens, and his place in ancient society is described in Job 29:5-25. Then, without warning, calamity fell upon

that righteous man, and his serenity was ruined. Job could neither explain nor understand what had happened; it seemed God had forsaken him. Yet, throughout the darkness of his long ordeal, he never lost faith in the Lord, and the world now recognizes Job learned more in the darkness than he could have learned elsewhere.

The Treasure in an Indisputable Heartbreak (Luke 22:59~2)

Peter was ashamed and humiliated by memories. He had denied and dishonored the Lord and now believed he was beyond redemption. Even if the Lord pardoned his sin, Peter would never forgive himself! Paul described how the risen Christ appeared to Simon Peter before he was seen by any of the other apostles (see 1 Cor.

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15:5). Perhaps the Savior sought Peter because the troubled disciple lacked the courage to rejoin his brethren. It is not known what the Lord said to His fallen follower, but evidently Christ's tenderness removed all bitterness from Peter's soul. Somewhere in the shadows that guilty man found a treasure of incalculable worth-it is called forgiveness.

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ISAIAH AND THE MIRACLE OF CHILDBIRTH

"When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied" (Isa. 53:10-11).

The fifty-third chapter of Isaiah is among the most loved parts of the Bible. Inspired by the Spirit of God, the prophet described in detail all that would happen when the Messiah became the Redeemer of the world. The Scripture is all the more remarkable because most of the contemporaries emphasized that when the Anointed One arrived, He would subdue His enemies and establish the kingdom of God. Isaiah never contradicted his brethren; he merely insisted that to have a spiritual kingdom, it would be necessary to find spiritual people over whom the Messiah could reign. The prophet stated the kingdom would become a reality, but only after the Messiah had died to make reconciliation possible. Then he began to elucidate the details of the crucifixion of Christ, and among his promises or predictions was a statement which seemed to be ludicrous. Isaiah said a man would die giving birth to a baby.

The Messiah in "The Travail of His Soul"

The word "travail" was a word used for childbearing. A woman about to give birth was described as "being in travail" (for example, see Isa. 13:8; 21:3; 66:8; Jer. 31:8). Today that word has changed; people speak of a woman being "in labor." Dr. Strong translated the verse, "He shall see the fruit of His pain," and this corresponds with the meaning of the text. To paraphrase Isaiah, "The Anointed One will bring forth His baby; the first-fruits of a great family." The exact time of this amazing event was clearly stated ("when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin." It was not to happen when Christ healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, nor when He raised the dead. Isaiah predicted it would take place when the Messiah gave Himself "a ransom for many." That prediction was fulfilled when the dying thief requested the Lord to help him get into the kingdom of God. Christ would "see His seed." The magnitude of that amazing miracle can only be understood in the light of Matthew's announcement that both thieves cursed the Lord (see Mat. 27:44). Perhaps Isaiah appeared to be foolish, but evidently he was well-informed.

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The Message of Love... "Yet It Pleas'd the Lord to Bruise Him"

I remember traveling on an overnight train from Edinburgh to London when a business man sat with me in the coach. We were both bored with the journey so I began a conversation. When I congratulated him on being a Jew, he was astounded, and asked, "How can you say that when you Gentiles believe the Jews crucified your Jesus?" I smiled and replied, "Sir~ that is false. Neither Jews nor Gentiles crucified Jesus of Nazareth." He was puzzled, so I opened my Bible and asked if he believed the prophet Isaiah. When he replied, "Of course I do," I asked

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permission to read what the prophet said. "Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; He hath put him to grief" (Isa. 53:10). He listened when I explained it was not nails that kept Christ upon His cross, but the amazing love of God. Isaiah predicted the Messiah would "make his soul an offering for sin." Jesus "appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26). When we separated in London, he supplied his business address and invited me to meet him again. I never had that opportunity, but what I said during the night was seed planted in fertile ground.

The Miracle of Liberation... "He Shall Prolong His Days"

Isaiah taught that the power of death would be vanquished; although the Messiah would die, He would rise again to attend to His Father's

affairs - "the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand." The prophet said the Messiah would "justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities" (Isa. 53:11). The thief was the firstfruits of a tremendous harvest; many people would emulate his example, and the church would become a reality. It is understandable why orthodox Jews dislike this Scripture which remains one of the greatest pieces of literature ever written.

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.

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