

## “Where Is Your Strength?”

<b><u>Occasion</u></b>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<b><u>Day, Date &amp; Time</u></b>	Sunday 5 June 2005 at 18:30
<b><u>Basis</u></b>	Isaiah 13:1 – 23:18
<b><u>Reading</u></b>	Isaiah 13:1-5, 17-22; 14:1-8, 12-15, 28-32; 15:1-2, 5; 16:1-7, 12, 13
<b><u>Songs</u></b>	from Mission Praise: 731, 729, 726, 793, 685, 744 from The Source: 373
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Few of you will have failed to note the recent rapid demise of MG Rover.  
Certainly, those of us who drive Rover or MG cars have taken a keen interest in the matter.

According to an article in Enjoying MG  
(the magazine of the MG Owners' Club)  
from the time when the company was rescued from BMW closure  
it was clear that there was a “need to find a strong partner to help shoulder the heavy  
investment costs  
involved in developing new models”.

Size, it seems, is essential to survival in the modern world.

Almost every day we read in our newspapers of company mergers,  
of large corporations swallowing up smaller businesses,  
of companies closing their smaller plants in order to develop greater efficiency at their larger  
more profitable sites,  
and all in the name of greater efficiency,  
enhanced market share  
and greater size.

Even the European Union,  
which has suffered such a set-back this week  
with the French and the Dutch populations delivering a resounding ‘No’ to their referenda  
on the EU constitution,  
has sold itself to the people of Europe as a means to attain better employment,  
and greater economic prosperity,  
due to its size.

It seems that it is the way of the world.

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Anyone who has witnessed the break up of the Soviet Union,  
or the former Yugoslavia  
in recent times  
will be aware that the rise and fall of super powers  
and of lesser powers  
can savagely affect the stability of many smaller states

and whole regions of the world  
for many, many years to come.

In my lifetime I have witnessed the demise of the USSR,  
the decline and break up of the British empire,  
and the fall, but not the rise, of the Third Reich,  
and as we go back in history,  
we can observe the failure of many empires and civilisations  
for as far back as we can see.

At the time when Isaiah was prophesying,  
around 715 BC,  
what we now call the Middle East was in turmoil.

The once mighty nation of Israel  
which had flourished and grown in power under King David and King Solomon  
had not only weakened itself,  
first by civil war  
and then by partition,  
but also lost control of the states around its borders,  
leaving itself and them vulnerable to the predatory attacks of the super powers of the day.

The super power at that time was Assyria to the north east,  
with Egypt also playing a dominant role in the south.

At the time that Isaiah was writing, Assyria was a threat to almost all of Judah’s neighbours.

Judah had earlier made an alliance with many of them  
and had withstood the attacks of Assyria  
and had as a result enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity under Uzziah.  
But by now,  
Assyria was getting aggressive again and Ahaz had chosen to make an alliance with Assyria  
to protect Judah from constant attacks by their neighbours.

It was into this political situation that Isaiah was speaking to Judah.  
But Judah’s problems were not only political,  
but spiritual as well.

Way back in Exodus,  
God had made it clear that they were not to form alliances with the peoples of the promised land.  
This was extended as a judgement on Solomon  
who lost his kingdom because of his many foreign wives  
and the alliances he had made with peoples as far north as the Hittites  
and as far south as Egypt.

God had also made it abundantly clear that if the people would keep his commandments  
and not follow other gods  
then they would prosper in the land.

But if not,  
then he would punish them  
and they would be destroyed  
and carried off to other lands  
where God was not worshipped.

And as we read our Bibles  
we find that this is what happened.

Nearly all the kings of the Northern Kingdom,  
referred to as Ephraim here by Isaiah  
had failed to keep God’s laws  
and they were the first to disappear.

But many of the kings of Judah were also disobedient to God.  
And what we find is that when a king obeys God,  
the people and the land prosper,  
but when one disobeys God the people suffer.

But God is not just the God of the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.  
He is the God of all nations.

All nations play a part both in his plans  
and eventually, in his offer of salvation to all peoples.

Israel were, and still are, God’s chosen people,  
and he will keep his promises to them.  
But Judah are special because from them will arise the Messiah  
who will open up the blessings of God to all the world  
to everyone who repents of their sins and turns to the God of all creation.

So what we see in our eleven chapters tonight is God speaking through Isaiah  
with his judgements against those nations around Judah.

As with all prophesies,  
they are a mixture of current observation  
and prophetic words about the future.

They demonstrate that God is the God of the whole world,  
not just that little bit where we live,  
nor just that bit where people call on his name,  
but all of it,  
because he made it and he peopled it.

But the significant thrust here is that these nations are also under God’s judgement  
and therefore for Judah to ally themselves with these peoples is futile,  
because they too will fall under the weight of God’s wrath.

They make gloomy and dismal reading  
yet there is a sense of victory,  
and they are shafted through with glimpses of God’s mercy,  
redemption and ultimate restoration.

There is only one place for Judah to go,  
if indeed they are willing to do so.  
And that is to follow the word of God  
and find their refuge in him;  
to follow His ways and submit to his laws.

But so vulnerable are they  
that the temptation to make unholy alliances is too great to resist.

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In many ways,  
the church in Britain is in much the same position.  
We are besieged on all sides.  
Not by physical persecution,  
as in so many lands today,  
but by the world of ideas.

In Leicester,

they are this week considering the removal of Gideon bibles  
from Hospital bedsides  
on the feeble pretexts that they will offend other faiths  
and could aid the spread of MRSA.

Within the church,

we are constantly being challenged to accept non-biblical practices  
and non-biblical ideas,  
so that we appear more tolerant to society,  
to water down the gospel to make it easier to understand  
or more attractive to the post-modern mind,  
or to adopt the latest get-big-quick methodology  
as though some worldly growth-hormone will suddenly produce so-called ‘healthy’  
churches.

Whereas, if we read our Bibles,

God requires that we remain humble,  
obey and teach his word  
and acknowledge the Lord in all that we do,  
so allowing the Holy Spirit to work through us into the lives of others  
in his way, and his time.

Our portion tonight is large and cumbersome.

But to get a grip on it,  
we can divide it into two sections.

Chapters 13 to 20 comprise five prophecies against nations surrounding Judah.

An oracle concerning Babylon;  
A prophecy against the Philistines;  
A prophecy against Moab;  
An oracle concerning Damascus and Ephraim;  
And an oracle concerning Egypt.

Chapters 21 to 23 comprise a further five prophecies which are much more enigmatic.

An oracle concerning the valley of vision;  
An oracle concerning Dumah (or Edom);  
An oracle concerning Arabia;  
An oracle concerning the desert by the sea;  
And finally, an oracle concerning Tyre.

From each,

a few highlights must needs suffice:

First we must look at Babylon in chapters 13 and 14:

At the time, Babylon was under the rule of Assyria.

But it was still a proud city  
and the prophet foresaw that one day it would be the vehicle of God’s wrath against Judah.  
This would happen when Jerusalem was sacked and the people carried off into exile.

But what the prophet also saw was that one day Babylon itself would be overthrown.

From our studies in Daniel in the morning service,

we know that this happened under Belshazzar  
in the famous story of the writing on the wall in Daniel chapter 5.

Babylon has always been symbolic of man’s rebellion against God,

from the days of the Tower of Babel in Genesis  
to the Babylon in the book of Revelation.  
But it was a real place,  
and the Lord would use this city to punish his people,  
but they in turn would be punished by God for their sins.

Look at Isaiah 13:17, 19 and 20, to see what God says. **(Read these verses)**  
Josh McDowell, Peter Stoner and others  
have catalogued the facts that this city no longer exists.  
Even the River Euphrates has changed its course and effectively abandoned the city.  
There is nothing left but mounds to indicate its past.

But now look at the shaft of light in this prophecy that appears in 14:1.  
“The Lord will have compassion on Jacob,  
once again he will choose Israel,  
and will settle them in their own land”.

Our God is a restorative God.  
He loves to restore his people and bring them back to himself.  
The Bible is full of promises of restoration.  
The gospel is all about restoring lost mankind  
to a loving relationship with a holy God.

But it will always be on his terms.  
Sadly Christians fall into the trap of thinking that God restores others on our terms.  
We think because we are restored  
we must therefore be more pleasing to God  
than those who are just being restored  
and we get all self righteous,  
proud,  
critical  
and hypocritical.

Judah was, as we know, restored after 70 years of exile in Babylon,  
Jerusalem was rebuilt under Nehemiah  
and worship of God was restored under Ezra,  
but Judah was always a vassal state  
and continued to be so through the time of Christ and Roman occupation,  
until it was destroyed in AD 70.

Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was it restored to national status.  
But the restoration of Judah has never lived up to the utopian view set out here in Isaiah’s prophecy.  
The final fulfilment must wait for God’s final day of the Lord.

Next I want to go to the oracle against the Philistines in chapter 14:28ff.  
This was given in the year king Ahaz died.

Back in chapter 7:1,  
Ahaz had rejected God’s word  
and made an alliance with Assyria  
rather than relying on God for the security of God’s people,  
and Isaiah knew that this spelt the end of the Davidic dynasty.  
Hence the reference here to the ‘rod that struck you’ being broken,  
for David was the one who had subdued the Philistines.

This oracle suggests that they were proposing an alliance with the new King Hezekiah,  
against the Assyrian threat.  
But Isaiah tells the Philistines not to rejoice in the weakness of Judah

and advises that the envoys are sent away with the answer in verse 32,  
that ‘The Lord has established Zion,  
and in her his afflicted people will find refuge.

Again the message is reinforced.  
Only in the living God,  
could refuge be assured,  
for He rules all nations.

But when we come to chapters 15 & 16, the picture is very different.  
Moab it seems is already on the run.  
Cities have already fallen to the invading armies of Assyria.  
Refugees are fleeing everywhere.  
The people go up to their temples in vain.

God, through Isaiah, weeps at their calamity  
and offers those who will to find refuge with his people  
and urges Judah to take them in.  
For, he says, “the oppressor will come to an end”.

But it seems that their pride is too great.  
They will not turn to their enemy for refuge.

And so it is today.  
To many,  
God is their enemy.  
To others,  
he simply isn’t there.  
Not even as a last resort,  
will they turn to Him.  
He is discredited.  
An impostor.  
At best a hypocrite of a God.  
At worst, a demon of a God  
who allows and even causes all the suffering in our world.

This week, a twelve-year-old girl abducts  
and then tries to hang  
a five-year-old boy.  
The media and the public  
debate the causes of evil behaviour,  
but no-one even suggests that the decline of the Christian consensus  
and the subsequent loss of public morality  
has anything to do with it

Now, as then, few listen to the wisdom and warnings of the prophet.

I believe that these chapters of Isaiah have a message for us today at all levels.  
Whether it be at national level,  
as a society and a culture,  
at family level,  
individually  
or as a church.

We live in days of material prosperity, never before know in Great Britain,  
yet we are in debt up to our ears.

We have more antisocial behaviour than we have experienced for decades,  
law and order is failing,  
drug and alcohol abuse are rising  
and our Christian heritage is being dumped as fast as possible  
in an unprecedented scramble to become a secular society.

As a nation we have allied ourselves with a Europe which neither shares our values,  
nor it appears,  
knows what its values are.

Our established church,  
itself in disarray,  
stands by,  
helpless to defend Christianity against the tide,  
not of other religious belief,  
but of pseudo-scientific thought promoting an atheistic world view,  
while false religions and ideologies scramble to fill the vacuum of spiritual experience.  
And the evangelical church hovers between dead orthodoxy  
and shallow experiential entertainment style Christianity.

As individuals,  
we are depressed,  
overworked,  
dissatisfied,  
critical and cynical.  
Always wanting more and more,  
and caring for each other less and less.

But do not fear.  
God is near.

There is only one place to turn.  
And that is to God himself.

Hence we have two tasks before us as we leave here tonight.

The first is to place God at the forefront of our lives.  
Our strength lies in him.

He is a restorative God.  
If we have lost him  
or feel far away,  
he will welcome us back with open arms.  
This doesn't mean that we will have instant healing or instant joy.  
We may do,  
but that is not the point.  
The point is to put our trust in him  
and then whatever befalls us,  
we will know that we are in his hands.

And the second is to encourage one another  
and all whom we meet to put their faith in God too.  
There is no room for criticism,  
there is no room for cynicism.  
There is no room for negative thinking.  
God always encourages positive thought.  
He offers salvation and forgiveness from our many sins through Jesus

if only we will repent and submit to Him.  
And he loves to restore us,  
but not only us,  
but every person on this planet  
to harmonious relationships with himself

Put your trust in the Lord alone,  
for that is where your true strength lies.

May it be so for every one of us tonight.

Amen

Paul Rydon  
05 June 2005