

Isa 6:9-13

[9] And He said, "Go, and tell this people:

'Keep on listening, but do not perceive;

Keep on looking, but do not understand.' [10] "Render the hearts of this people insensitive,

Their ears dull,

And their eyes dim,

Lest they see with their eyes,

Hear with their ears,

Understand with their hearts,

And return and be healed." [11] Then I said, "Lord, how long?" And He answered,

"Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant,

Houses are without people,

And the land is utterly desolate, [12] "The LORD has removed men far away,

And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. [13] "Yet there will be a tenth portion in it,

And it will again be subject to burning,

Like a terebinth or an oak

Whose stump remains when it is felled.

The holy seed is its stump."

Matt 13:14-17

"And in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,

'YOU WILL KEEP ON HEARING, BUT WILL NOT UNDERSTAND;

AND YOU WILL KEEP ON SEEING, BUT WILL NOT PERCEIVE; [15] FOR THE HEART OF THIS PEOPLE HAS BECOME DULL,

AND WITH THEIR EARS THEY SCARCELY HEAR,

AND THEY HAVE CLOSED THEIR EYES

LEST THEY SHOULD SEE WITH THEIR EYES,

AND HEAR WITH THEIR EARS,

AND UNDERSTAND WITH THEIR HEART AND RETURN,

AND I SHOULD HEAL THEM.'

MT 13:16 "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. [17] "For truly I say to you, that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

Acts 28:23-28

AC 28:23 They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. [24] Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. [25] They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet:

AC 28:26 " 'Go to this people and say,

"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;

you will be ever seeing but never perceiving."

AC 28:27 For this people's heart has become calloused;

they hardly hear with their ears,

and they have closed their eyes.

Otherwise they might see with their eyes,

hear with their ears,

understand with their hearts

and turn, and I would heal them.'

AC 28:28 "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!"

Harden to Soften

Isaiah 6:9-13

Isaiah's commission in chapter 6 is brutal. "Go and tell the people," God says. His mission is to speak, to preach, to tell the people something. Tell them this message. "Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand" (6:9). In other words, Isaiah had to tell the people that no matter what he spoke or wrote to them, they just wouldn't get it. God would blind their spiritual eyes through the searing light of his word. Yet, the word is good. It is not the word that is evil because a hardening takes place. It is man's heart that is evil. So we have an interesting thing taking place. As E. J. Young says, "Strange indeed are the ways of the great God. He commands that all men hear His word and walk in His paths. At the same time He sends forth a messenger to prevent this result from occurring. He opposes the Word of God with the Word of God."¹

I honestly can't imagine how anyone could have ministered for over 50 years with this as his message without going completely crazy, can you? It is the length and content of the message that shows us the ultimate purpose of this vision as far as the prophet is concerned. God has to prepare this man for what is to come. This vision will become a source of strength and courage in the darkest hours of Isaiah's life.

Now then, think for a moment about preaching a message like this. It is so common in our day to hear that the only successful ministry is the one that grows and gains more and more and more people. As far as I can tell, Isaiah never had a single convert. Was his a failure? Of course not. It's no wonder that this book isn't exactly the place that church growth experts run to when proving their theories to us.

As I was considering this hardening message, I found it interesting to think about it in the context of the rest of the book. When we read the *whole* book of Isaiah, we see that he was not *just* a preacher of hell fire and brimstone (which you might assume if you message is hardening, because many equate the two). Amos or Obadiah probably come closer to that model, and their books were much shorter, probably because no human can sustain such a message for that long without it destroying them. What we see from this is that hell fire preaching and hardening preaching are not one and the same. Isaiah is grand in vision, broad in scope, and multifaceted in message. In fact, there is no other prophet who has such a varying degree of things to say about the nation, about God, or about the future. The broadness of the message means that one can basically preach through this book and in this way systematically preach through the totality of Christian theology. This makes the commission all the more striking. When Isaiah preached hell, they wouldn't turn. When he preached repentance from sin, they wouldn't turn. When he preached about the servant, they wouldn't turn. When he spoke of great comfort or eternal life, they wouldn't turn. When God directly confronts the people with a covenant lawsuit and threat of exile and physical death, they wouldn't turn. When the things foretold came to pass, they wouldn't turn. Good news, bad news, lofty news, low news, common news, holy news, it didn't matter. They people wouldn't listen to any of it.

But why? Why would they not turn? Why would they not listen? It is as the text says. God does not want them to listen. He does not want them to repent. He does not want

¹ Young, *Isaiah Vol. 1*, 258.

to have mercy upon them anymore. He is tired of them, had more than enough of them. That's what the first five chapters are all about. Remember? "The multitude of your sacrifices-- what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings" (1:10).

There are really two parts to our message this morning. The first is to consider the hardening message in more detail. You know all those things that Christians in our day hate to talk (and hear) about? They are all here: damnation, reprobation, and hardening. You have to understand the truth of this Being called Jehovah by understanding the *whole counsel* of God. And yet, we must not forget to talk about this text through the eyes of the New Testament. So the other part is to consider its historic-redemptive purpose. The NT explains to us a very specific reason for Isaiah's particular calling. If we fail to understand the salvation that is purposed through this hardening particular hardening, then we have failed in the only task that matters when interpreting and studying the Bible. We have failed to see the gracious provisions that God has made to *us* through our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is a quick saying to remember about this text. **Raise your thoughts high to the lofty ideas of election and reprobation. But then come down to understand their purpose in the person of Jesus Christ.**

In order to make this clear to us, I want us to go to the ending. It is here that the basis for a redemptive/historical interpretation is made clear. I keep using this term. **Redemptive historical interpretations of Scripture mean that we take both the immediate historical context seriously** (that is - what would this text mean to the Israelite situation in Isaiah's day) **and the grand theme of history seriously** (that is, how does this text fit in with the very purpose of history, which is for God to glorifying himself by exalting and lifting up his Son).

Have you considered Christ in Isaiah 6? Or have you missed him completely? He is there you know, as he is in all Scripture. But in this particular place, he is manifestly visible. You couldn't miss him here anymore than you could miss a tree if it fell right in front of you in the forest. In fact, this is the very image we are presented with. Jesus Christ is pictured as the stump that is left behind when a mighty tree falls over.

If you have ever walked through a forest where they have done logging, you know what it is to look upon a stump. Just as a branch of a tree may be dead, yet the tree still has life, so also it is possible that a tree may have life after *everything* has been cut away but the bottom stump. This is because the life of a tree ultimately resides in its roots. Sometimes a shoot will return and give life to the seemingly dead stump. In its place, an entirely new (yet not new) tree may then grow. **(This is a great way to picture in what sense the new covenant is "new.")**

This is what Isaiah pictures for us here. There are three historical perspectives to the single meaning that lays open to us in this passage. They concern Israel, Gentiles, and Jesus Christ. **Verse 13** says, "But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land." Look at two things here: **stump** and **seed**. The most immediate context, our first perspective, is to view this *stump* as a sort of remnant within a remnant. This is what I mean. After the land lies utterly ruined, God will still graciously preserve his tithe – his people that belong to him. These are the "tenth" in the first part of **verse 13**. This tenth consists of physical national Israelites who will survive the exile and captivity and will be returned to the land. They will rebuild the temple, restore the keeping of the law, repent of their father's and their own sins, and will

pave the way over the next 500 years for the coming of Messiah. (Those who immediately survive the exile may also be said to be a spiritual remnant of physical Israelites.) Thus, it is proper to understand the remnant as being the nation of Jews – from this perspective.

Yet, Isaiah clearly says that this tenth, this remnant, will become subject to wasting away (to burning) again. In other words, the nation is not to last forever. It must give way to something better, something more complete. This is why we see over the course of time that the spiritual renewal of those in Nehemiah and Ezra's day gives way to the physical shell only as can be seen in the Pharisee. So the nation will again deteriorate from within by becoming corrupt just as their father's did. They will have to be cut down again by God. This final cutting down takes place during the reign of our Lord Jesus, who was sent by God *to the nation of Israel*. It is important to remember this, because Christ's ministry is the fulfillment of the ministry begun by Isaiah to the nation of Israel. This is why our Lord quotes this very passage (Isaiah 6) when explaining the reason for his own preaching in parables. By once more hardening Israel, God is preparing the world for the sacrifice which would come at Mt. Calvary.

Do you see then what Isaiah is in fact predicting? **He is not predicting one hardening** here that would last until the land would go into exile. **He is predicting at least two:** his own times and the times when Messiah would walk the earth. **This is why the tenth is spared to once more grown in her own land only to be felled by God a second time.**

HARDENING

Isaiah says some very difficult words in this passage for many people to swallow (even as it was for Israel, which was the point). These words tell us in no uncertain terms that God is sending Isaiah to harden people. This is what theologians have called the doctrine of reprobation. It is clear that God foresees the result of Isaiah's preaching, because Isaiah is told to continue until the nation lies in ruins. If this was not foreseen, then why tell it to Isaiah? I think the open theologian must turn God into a sadistic prankster in Isaiah 6. If God doesn't know the future, then for God to say such a thing is nothing but a cruel joke to a man who is going to have to live with this message for the rest of his life. This is hardly a compassionate God.

"Now, if God foresees that such a particular result will be the consequence, it is clear that that particular result is certain and that it has already been determined by God. From this conclusion there is no escape. In His mysterious wisdom God had foreordained that this people would not respond to the blessed overtures of the gospel... not ordaining them unto life eternal, and for their sin ordain[ing] them to dishonor and wrath."² I do not think it is a coincidence that Paul quotes from Isaiah so much in Romans, especially chapters 9-11. He is thinking exactly like Isaiah. This is why he gives those very challenging words, **"Before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad--in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls--she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'** Just as it is written: **'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'...** God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me: **'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?' But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"...** What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with

² Ibid, 259.

great patience the objects of his wrath--prepared for destruction?" (Rom 9:11-13, 18-20, 22).

I'll speak frankly for a moment. We live in times that resemble the dark ages far more than any of us could imagine. It was out of the dark ages that Reformation shown forth it's mighty light and changed the world forever. It was the universal belief of the first reformers that God has his sovereign right to do with his creation whatever he sees fit. JI Packer was exactly right when he said, "Historically, it is a simple matter of fact that Martin Luther and John Calvin, and for that matter, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and all the leading Protestant theologians of the first epoch of the Reformation, stood on precisely the same ground here."³ For the Reformers, the doctrine of election and its necessary corollary reprobation were the very guardian of the gospel. If Christians in our day ever hope to make a difference again in this world, we must recover these doctrines of Holy Scripture. If we do not and continue in the tepid self-centered Arminianism that is so prevalent, we will continue to have nothing to offer to a dying world. Why? For one simple reason. Those who are so focused upon man cannot ever hope to see a holy God. If we cannot see a holy God, then how can we possibly tell anyone else about him? If we are so concerned with what seekers feel they need, then there is no room for the gospel, because no seeker feels he needs the gospel. Let us not be ashamed to speak forth the truth of God's word, even if it cost us our homes, our land, or our lives. If you think life is hard for you and that you can't possibly be brave like this, then I challenge you to go back and read about the lives of these very prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Amos, Hosea, and Jonah. They were not afraid of speaking forth these truths and many of them died – Isaiah was sawn in two! Let us once again become a faithful generation who is not looking for our home here and now, but who are seeking after their eternal home so diligently that we will forsake all earthly things in order to make God known to a dying world.

A Question

Having just explored the meaning of the hardening of the stump, we are ready to talk about the seed. As we begin to shift our focus from stump to seed, I want to ask you a question. Why did God stop having patience with Israel? Was it that they had crossed over some moral line that God just can't be patient with anymore? The answer is a solid and important "no." This generation was no worse than any other. We must not think that God doesn't really care all that much about the sin of those generations that came before this, but now somehow, he just can't put up with it anymore. Sin is sin to God. He can't stand the sight of any of it. He could rightly have destroyed the nation at any moment. At the same time, God is always just as kind, merciful, tolerant, and patient with his covenant people at one time as he is at another. So the explanation for this no must be seen in something else. This is where the seed fits in. To put it clearly, the reason that God is now going to punish Israel is not as much because of her own sin (because that is always before them) as it is because this is the time God has chosen to show justice to the oppressed, wrath to the wicked and holiness to the world. This is the time to begin the countdown to fulfill the promises given to Adam, Abraham, Moses, and David. This is the time to plant the seed, and in the due course of a few more years, the seed will germinate, grow, and be killed (only be resurrected) and to reign as King of Israel.

³ Packer, introductory essay in Luther's Bondage of the Will.

Church the Seed

This seed of Isaiah is to be viewed by us from two perspectives, because references to “seed” in the NT basically fall into two groups. The first is the NT elect people of God. This consists of both Jews and Gentiles. It is called the church. It is the Gentile motif that is so important for us to understand here. Since most of us are Gentiles, aliens to the promises of God, we had better make sure that we can defend our belief that we are now allowed to partake in the vine. **The Gentiles are the spiritual children (seed) of Abraham.** The NT says, “**The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring--not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all**” (Rom 4:16). Abraham was after all promised that he would be the father of “**many nations.**”

And so in the book of Acts we see the fulfillment of this taking place as each new Gentile city sees a church established in its center. It is this scene that Isaiah 6 is quoted by Paul in Acts 28. Let's look at **Acts 28:23-28.** “

[The Jewish leaders] arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: “The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet:

“Go to this people and say,
“You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”
For this people's heart has become calloused;
they hardly hear with their ears,
and they have closed their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts
and turn, and I would heal them.”

“Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”

Notice what happens here after Paul reads from Isaiah's text. Some believe! Those who believe we may call the remnant, even as we have already called some national Jews this. But others “would not believe.” How ironic. What has happened to Isaiah and then to Jesus is also happening to Paul. Jews are being hardened by the very message that could soften them. Why? Well, Paul tells us why. After reading the text he explains the historic-redemptive purpose for the hardening. “**Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!**”

Can you see it? If God does not harden the nation of Israel and if he lets them turn and repent, then salvation will remain in the hands of this single nation. For all times then, if a person is going to be saved, by must become a national Jew. But the nation was never able to keep the terms of the covenant like they should. They didn't do it in Joseph's day, in Moses' day, in the days of the Judges, the days of the kings, the days of the prophets, the days after the exile or the days of Jesus and John the Baptist. God can't let men and women keep themselves in a covenant, for he knows that they will

perish. This is why God is not going to have mercy on them any longer. **This is why he has to keep the covenant for them.** Once he does this, then the stipulations of the covenant are fulfilled. Those ceremonial and sacrificial aspects of the law are allowed to be taken away so that they might not overshadow the one who has fulfilled them. And thus, Gentiles (many nations) are allowed entrance into the covenant promises.

Have you ever thought to thank God for hardening the Jewish people? You may not have. You may think such a thing would be blasphemous. But it isn't. This was God's purpose and God's doing. We ought to think him for all of his doings, including the reprobation of a few so that many more may be saved. **Do you see that even reprobation does not take place in a vacuum?** Even the hardening of the chosen nation of God (though not the elect) serves a purpose. As it is said in **Romans 11:25**, **"a partial hardening (that is not all Jews are hardened, but many are) has happened until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in."** How wonderful and mysterious and terrifying are the ways of God. He hardens his own so that he might bring even more in. He uses the word to accomplish this purpose without ever destroying our responsibility to repent. He predestines all things without ever doing damage to our freedom. I don't understand it, and if I did I suppose I would be God. Yet, I may and must affirm it for this is what it means to trust in God by faith alone.

Christ the Seed

The third perspective must now be brought into our sight. **"Seed" does not only point to a group of people called the church. It also points more specifically to one person.** So while we may understand the holy seed arising out of the stump to be covenant Jews and Gentiles in general who live during our own times, we must ultimately see that this seed can only be talking about us as we are hidden in Christ. No one has life apart from the vine. No one comes to the father but through Jesus. Ultimately speaking, Jesus Christ is the seed of Isaiah 6:13. Isaiah will say in a couple of chapters, **"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit" (Isa 11:1).** Isaiah 11 uses "shoot" language to explain what is going to happen. A shoot is nothing but the seed bearing fruit. And so the holy seed that lives in the stump in chapter 6 is the beginning of everything else that is said about Messiah in his magnificent book.

Paul explains to us that while the seed of Abraham includes many descendents, ultimately the word itself is singular; and it is singular for a reason. He says, **"The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say 'and to seeds,' meaning many people, but 'and to your seed,' meaning one person, who is Christ" (Gal 3:16).** Seed in God's mind has always meant Christ. We are only seeds with him as we are adopted into his family. The seed was promised to Adam, **"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed. He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel." (Gen 3:15).** This is talking about Christ even as it was with Abraham.

The strange dietary laws (for example **Lev 27:30**) about seeds and fruit being holy to the Lord can only be comprehended truly as they point us towards Christ. Otherwise, this makes absolutely no sense and is completely random and strange. Balaam prophesied about this seed when he said, **"Water shall flow from [Jacob's] buckets, and his seed shall be by many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted" (Num 24:7).** Ethan sings about him in **Psalm 89:4**, **"I have sworn to David My servant, I will establish your seed forever."** And Zechariah prophesies about him in this way, **"But now I will not treat the remnant of this people as in the former days,"**

declares the LORD of hosts. `For there will be peace for the seed: the vine will yield its fruit, the land will yield its produce, and the heavens will give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to inherit all these things” (Zech 8:11-12).

You see, THE Seed is ultimately the reason why the chosen people of Israel are hardened. You must not think of hardening without also thinking of Christ *and his mercy*. It is a trap that we must never let ourselves be prone to fall into. Never let yourself get caught up in the speculation of God’s ways without coming back down to the incarnation. This may seem like a small and trivial point to you, but I assure you it most defiantly is not. It is your only hope. *You are not allowed to think about God unless you think about him in his Son. You are not supposed to speculate about God’s ways, unless you make them concrete in the body of our saviour.* If you do these things – thinking that you can get away with them – thinking that you can afford to put Messiah on the back burner for a while in your own theological ponderings, then you will get yourself locked away in a dungeon that you cannot escape from. You will find yourself lost in a maze that you cannot get out of. For man cannot live in the mind of the Glorious One of Israel for long without it doing something very harmful to his soul. Why? Because you do not know God in this way. You cannot. *“My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways”* says the Lord. “I am God and you are a man,” says the Lord. “Do you know how the foundations of the world were put in place?” Says the Lord? You can only know God as he has revealed himself to you through Jesus Christ. So always, always, always make sure that your lofty thoughts on God’s ways find their way back to Jesus. Don’t be afraid to ask tough questions about God – even as we are considering this morning. But in the end, be satisfied in God by seeing how it is that all of the Father’s ways are brought to pass to glorify his Son.

In hardening Israel, God is going to gain glory for himself through Christ. You, the Gentile or even Jewish Christian that you are – are only a derivative recipient of this ultimate truth. Thus, *Isaiah 6* both begins and ends with God gaining glory for himself. This glory starts in heaven with the angels and makes its way down to man’s earthly abode. It begins in the temple and moves outwards to the entire world. It begins with Isaiah and spreads to all the people’s of the earth. All of this takes place through this most tiny of things: an invisible seed in a barren stump of the nation Israel. The seed will grow, first in the form of a shoot. He will arise to become taller than the cedars of Lebanon, stronger than the oaks of Bashan, mightier than the terebinths of Israel. He will become the Almighty Tree of Life. May all who come to him drink from the waters that are at its roots. Christ even now says to all who desire, “come!” If people will only take up the message once again and have faith in God’s word, we may be sure that many will be saved. This was Paul’s great hope for the Gentiles. Trust and believe in God’s plan and in his Son even this day. Call upon him today, while he may still be found. Today is the day of salvation.