

ISAIAH 17:4-11

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“In that day the glory of Jacob will be brought low,
and the fat of his flesh will grow lean.
And it shall be as when the reaper gathers standing grain
and his arm harvests the ears,
and as when one gleans the ears of grain
in the Valley of Rephaim.
Gleanings will be left in it,
as when an olive tree is beaten—
two or three berries
in the top of the highest bough,
four or five
on the branches of a fruit tree,
declares the LORD God of Israel.

“In that day man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel. He will not look to the altars, the work of his hands, and he will not look on what his own fingers have made, either the Asherim or the altars of incense.

“In that day their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the wooded heights and the hilltops, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation.

“For you have forgotten the God of your salvation
and have not remembered the Rock of your refuge;
therefore, though you plant pleasant plants
and sow the vine-branch of a stranger,
though you make them grow on the day that you plant them,
and make them blossom in the morning that you sow,
yet the harvest will flee away
in a day of grief and incurable pain.”¹

It is possible for a Christian to be barren and unfruitful even while having knowledge of Christ the Lord. This possibility is clearly presented in Peter’s second missive. There, Peter concludes his instruction in Christian responsibility for growth by saying, “If these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” [2 PETER 1:3-8]. If we will be fruitful we must know how to avoid being barren.

As was true for our Jewish forebears, we Christians are prone to neglect the lessons of history. We often ignore the warnings arising from judgement of the people of God; however, we ignore such warnings at our own peril. Paul cautioned the Corinthian saints against ignoring the warnings arising from Israel’s history [1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13].

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

In our text, Isaiah states that Israel had become barren because of three errors—errors that plague the churches of our Lord even in this day. Isaiah charged that Israel was suffering from a love of idols, a loss of memory and a loss of concentration. In a similar fashion, the professed people of God in this day are suffering from the same dreadful maladies that threaten the continued vitality of the congregations of our Lord.

You will perhaps recall that Isaiah delivered prophetic messages against several nations that surrounded Judah; Babylon, Moab and Damascus were warned as were Cush and Egypt—each being the focus of divine warning. At the time Isaiah delivered this prophetic warning, Syria served as a buffer between Israel and Assyria. No doubt, Israel felt secure because Syria was interposed between her and the Assyrians. Before warning Damascus of coming judgement, the man of God turned his attention first to Israel, and as is frequently the case, he telescoped prophecy to include the entire world during a future time referred to as “that day.” As Aram was destroyed, so all mankind will likewise face divine judgement in “that day” of divine judgement. It was as though destruction and restoration were telescoped into one great event, though the specific prophecies were in fact separated by millennia.

The message this day looks at the prophecy of judgement to come, with a view to challenging us in our own situation. If the words of the prophet apply to God’s people without restriction, as I believe to be true, we need to heed the warning that he penned.

Churches suffer from **A LOVE OF IDOLS** [vv. 7, 8]. “In that day” the churches, as is also true for Israel, will remember their “Maker.” The Israelites were idolaters of the worst sort. They had a reputation of following the Lord God of Heaven and earth, but their worship was perfunctory. Listen to Amos as he confronts God’s wayward people, reminding them of their idolatry. “Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You shall take up Sikkuth your king, and Kiyyun your star-god—your images that you made for yourselves” [AMOS 5:25].

You will recall that Ezekiel was God’s prophet who shared with God’s people the hardship of exile in Babylon. This courageous prophet exposed grossest idolatry among the religious and civil leadership—idolatry committed even as the people were enduring divine punishment. While in Babylonian captivity, this man of God saw the idolatry of God’s people and wrote the following words exposing the wickedness of the people.

“In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord GOD fell upon me there. Then I looked, and behold, a form that had the appearance of a man. Below what appeared to be his waist was fire, and above his waist was something like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming metal. He put out the form of a hand and took me by a lock of my head, and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the valley.

“Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, lift up your eyes now toward the north.’ So I lifted up my eyes toward the north, and behold, north of the altar gate, in the entrance, was this image of jealousy. And he said to me, ‘Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see still greater abominations.’

“And he brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, there was a hole in the wall. Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, dig in the wall.’ So I dug in the wall, and behold, there was an entrance. And he said to me, ‘Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here.’ So I went in and saw. And there, engraved on the wall all around, was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel. And before them stood seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the smoke of the cloud of incense went up. Then he said to me, ‘Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures? For they say, “The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land.”’ He said also to me, ‘You will see still greater abominations that they commit.’

“Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the LORD, and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. Then he said to me, ‘Have you seen this, O son of man? You will see still greater abominations than these.’

“And he brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east, worshipping the sun toward the east. Then he said to me, ‘Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations that they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence and provoke me still further to anger? Behold, they put the branch to their nose. Therefore I will act in wrath. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them’” [EZEKIEL 8:1-18].

Israel was infatuated with idols, even in the days of the Apostolic Faith. To be certain, pious Jews in that day would never have dreamed of bowing down to idols created from stone or wood; but they worshipped many of the same idols we worship to this day—position, power, pleasure and possessions. It is but a step from worshipping these characterisations of life to worshipping idols crafted with the hand. Stephen pointed this out, so infuriating the religious leaders that they engineered his execution.

“Our fathers refused to obey [Moses], but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:

“‘Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices,
during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?
You took up the tent of Moloch
and the star of your god Rephan,
the images that you made to worship;
and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.’”

[ACTS 7:39-43]

Lest we grow smug about our own standing before God, consider our own idols. I fear that contemporary Christians worship the gods of affluence, of success and of elitism. The evidence that we worship affluence is evident when we consider that for most evangelical church boards, one's bank balance is more important than character. Canadian Christians appear committed to the idea that wealth is of greater importance in church life than is the character of church leaders.

Reflecting society at large, modern churches worship success, listening to the instruction of sports stars and motion picture stars as though these "experts" had insight unobtainable from any other source. I am always amazed when I read a news article such as that which reported that the United States Congress invited a comedian to testify about farm labour and illegal immigration under the pretence that he had worked one day on a farm. I am astonished when Hollywood actors or actresses are heeded as though they were capable of teaching ethics or as if they were paragons of morality. When Larry Flynt becomes the arbiter of morality for politicians, I am astonished, though I am quickly becoming jaded at much that is accepted in our modern world. Tragically, that same attitude which characterises the world has crept into the churches of this day.

Even our language and our sentiments betray us. "If only that actor—or that football player or that television newscaster—would become a Christian, he (or she) would do so much good." We are worshipping an idol of our own making at that point, thinking that God needs the help of mere mortals because of their notoriety. Nothing could be further from the truth. What else can God mean when He says through the Apostle, "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing?"

Paul admonishes believers when he writes, "Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" [1 CORINTHIANS 1:18, 26-29].

We worship the god of elitism within modern churches. When we judge other Christians based on code words, preferred politics, the "theological company" one keeps or bellwether interpretations of biblical passages designed to test the "soundness" of position rather than testing the Faith espoused, we reveal that we worship elitism. I really do not care whether you say you are an inerrantist, but I do care that you live a life that reveals that the Bible is your authority for faith and practise. I really do not care what your eschatological position may be, but I do want to know whether you are looking for the return of the Son of God. It is a small matter to me whether your polity allows for an ecclesiastical hierarchy or whether you appeal to a congregational form of government, but I am deeply concerned that you are determined to live a holy life.

I make no bones that I am a Baptist—and a fundamental Baptist at that! I am unashamed to say that I came to my theological position through study that led to adoption of the great doctrines of the Word. I want to co-operate in advancing the Kingdom of Christ and in evangelism with those who share this theological perspective. Nevertheless, I rejoice with each soul who comes to faith in the Risen Son of God. Whether they enter Heaven dipped or drip-dried, they will be in Heaven by the grace of God. Though I am very much concerned that the saints prove obedient to Christ, I am much more concerned that those who profess His Name believe Him.

The two thoughts are not necessarily exclusive, for those who believe will reveal their faith through obedience to His commands. This is revealed in Jesus' own words, "Whoever has my commandments *and keeps them*, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him" [JOHN 14:21]. Jesus teaches the self-same truth in another few short verses. The Master said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.* These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" [JOHN 15:9-11].

Modern Canadians do not actually bow down to idols of wood or stone; nevertheless, we hold idols that are dear to our hearts. Family is more importance than faith to us. In our estimate, our standing in the eyes of others is more important than submission to Christ. Perception of others is more important than is praise to God, if our actions are any indication. If we had no idols, we would serve Christ without reservation. If we had no idols, we would obey His will without murmuring. If we had no idols, we would ask what the will of God is and fulfil that will regardless of what others may think.

Churches are suffering **A LOSS OF MEMORY** [v. 10a]. Can any statement be more arresting than this: "You have forgotten?" The 103rd PSALMS is a jewel of recited blessing.

"Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."

[PSALM 103:1-5]

Who would forget such blessings? If that 103rd PSALM is a jewel, how much richer still is the 136th PSALM. I will not recite the whole of the Psalm, but I invite you to explore the content. The Psalm begins with an admonition to give thanks to God.

"Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
Give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever."

[PSALM 136:1-3]

Every statement concludes with the reminder that “His steadfast love endures forever.” Literally, the Hebrew behind that phrase reads, *for to eternity is [His] grace*. The author of the Psalm then begins to recite the multiplied instances of God’s goodness—His provision for mankind, His deliverance of His people and at last His mercy to all peoples. The Psalm ends with these words encouraging thankfulness:

“It is he who remembered us in our low estate,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
and rescued us from our foes,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
he who gives food to all flesh,
for his steadfast love endures forever.”

[PSALM 136:23-25]

Israel had this rich heritage of divine blessing, and yet God was compelled to confront His chosen people throughout their history as a people who forgot their Rock. Long before apostasy was a settled way of life, Moses warned the people.

“Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked;
you grew fat, stout, and sleek;
then he forsook God who made him
and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation.
They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods;
with abominations they provoked him to anger.
They sacrificed to demons that were no gods,
to gods they had never known,
to new gods that had come recently,
whom your fathers had never dreaded.
You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you,
and you forgot the God who gave you birth.

...

“How could one have chased a thousand,
and two have put ten thousand to flight,
unless their Rock had sold them,
and the LORD had given them up?
For their rock is not as our Rock;
our enemies are by themselves.

...

“Vengeance is mine, and recompense,
for the time when their foot shall slip;
for the day of their calamity is at hand,
and their doom comes swiftly.’
For the LORD will vindicate his people
and have compassion on his servants,
when he sees that their power is gone
and none remaining, bond or free.

Then he will say, 'Where are their gods,
the rock in which they took refuge,
who ate the fat of their sacrifices
and drank the wine of their drink offering?
Let them rise up and help you;
let them be your protection!'"

[DEUTERONOMY 32:15-18, 30, 31, 35-37]

Israel could testify of the Living God that He is *THE ROCK OF OUR SALVATION* [PSALM 95:1], He is *OUR ETERNAL ROCK* [ISAIAH 26:4] and He is *THE ROCK OF ISRAEL* [ISAIAH 30:29]. Despite knowledge of God's steadfast love toward them, Israel was prone to wander from God.

I wonder if we who are called by the Name of the Son of God have lost *our* memory. At the broadest level, do we remember our roots and what makes us Christian? Do we who are called Christians remember what it is that makes us Christian? Do we pursue hard after Christ and seek to obey Him in all things?

We who call ourselves evangelicals, do we remember what evangelical means? Frankly, if we are not evangelistic we are not evangelical. If we fail to adhere to the truths that marked our spiritual forebears as evangelical, we have no right to the name. Do we believe in a practical sense that Jesus Christ is very God? Do we really believe that He died a sacrificial death, rose to life and ascended into the heavens? Are we actually convinced that He is coming again to receive those who by faith are born again? If we believe these things, to what will we point in our lives to verify our beliefs?

It is difficult to believe that there is any sense of longing for revival among the residents of our communities. We urgently need to return to our first love, because our pursuit of the Lord with the ardent abandon that marked our lives in the first blush of faith is woefully absent. Our witness is diluted by our desire of personal fulfilment and acquisition of material goods. If our lives are barren, let us heed the call of God to remember again God our Saviour. If our lives resemble parched and arid lands instead of well-watered plains bearing rich fruit to the praise of His glory, let us determine that we will again do those deeds that marked our lives when we were newborn in the Faith.

Churches are experiencing **A LOSS OF CONCENTRATION** [v. 10b]. Those are surely stunning words that Isaiah wrote: "you have not remembered the Rock of your refuge." It was bad enough that Israel demonstrated a love of idols and had suffered a loss of memory, but they were even then experiencing a loss of concentration. They no longer focused on their strong tower. The glory of the first Temple was already fading, its hallowed precincts contaminated by the invasion of various impure cults. Worse than the presence of foul cults was toleration of grossest wickedness by the people of God.

Just so, the churches of this day are experiencing a loss of concentration. There was a day in which Baptist people would not have tolerated wickedness among their members. It is fascinating to read the minutes of churches from another era. One need not travel very far back in time to read minutes dismissing from membership and barring from the Lord's Table those individuals who publicly disgraced the Name of Christ. Public drunkenness, swearing in public, gossip were each sufficient to earn dismissal from the assembly of saints. Nor were Baptists alone in this pursuit of purity before the Lord. All evangelical churches were equally serious about purity of their members.

A few years back, Immanuel Baptist Church of Little Rock, Arkansas was prominently named in news reports. This was the home church of William Jefferson Clinton, President of the United States. Membership in that church enabled the President to claim to be a Baptist, even while committing adultery and perjury. This continued unchecked in great measure because the congregation would not practise biblical discipline. That congregation apparently had concluded that it was more important to have as a member of the congregation the President of the United States, than it is to honour Christ the Lord by demanding purity. I point to that church as one example of the spiritual amnesia of modern Christians, who have forgotten the Rock, our fortress.

Perhaps we are prone to shake our heads in amusement and chuckle at the antics of those foolish believers in Little Rock; but I wonder when we last witnessed a Canadian church that held the members of the congregation to the biblical standard of conduct. I wonder when we last saw a church that actually remembered her Rock, her fortress. I wonder when we last knew of a church that dared expect that the members would actually submit to divine rule and hold themselves to biblical standards.

In the Hebrews letter is a humbling quotation. Listen as I read that Word aloud. “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

“Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.’

“It is for discipline that you have to endure” [HEBREWS 12:1-7].

We Christians have a focus for our faith—that focus is the Risen Saviour Himself. We are to fix our eyes on Him, just as the text states. We dare not lose our concentration. Instead, we are responsible to make every effort to honour Him through discovering what pleases Him and then doing those things that are pleasing before Him. As a Christian, my purpose should not be to join the most respectable church in town; my purpose must be to glorify God, if being a Christian has any real meaning. My pursuit in life must not be to gratify my own desires; instead, I am responsible to seek what honours Christ the Lord. In just such measure as I follow Christ may I anticipate the blessings of God.

Why speak from this text? What purpose is accomplished through preaching a message such as this that I have just delivered? First, I point out that the message is biblical; thus, **IT SERVES AS A WARNING** to each of us. “Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die” [cf. REVELATION 3:2], is the warning of the Word. God holds us responsible to be ruthless in seeking out and destroying every idol, to remember Him and to remain focused on His will. If we do not do so, we will be disciplined.

I had a minister ask me once whether I thought he would give an accounting to God. I assured him that not only did I so believe, but that I was also assured that each of us would give an account of our ministry to Him who appoints to service. He replied that he was not accountable to anyone ... not to Christ ... not to anyone. I smiled grimly as I informed him that in the day when we stand before the Judgement Seat of Christ he would give an account of his life and ministry. That minister needs to be warned. Just so, each Christian needs to be warned.

Again, **I AM RESPONSIBLE TO INSTRUCT THE PEOPLE OF GOD** that they may be sensitive to the work of God among the churches. I am responsible to deliver the whole counsel of God to the people of God. You are responsible to be discerning about the trends among the professed people of God. You are responsible to look upon the churches with an eye that distinguishes between light and darkness. Not everyone who says she is a Christian is one; not every minister is a minister of Christ. You are responsible to hold both ministers and churches accountable for the conduct of their service to Christ. Is a brother Christian beginning to clutter his life with idols? Confront that one in a spirit of love and gently urge him to walk again with Christ alone. Does a sister Christian live as though Christ is no longer a priority? Remind her of her first love and call her to live a godly life. Has the will of Jesus ceased to be the focus of the ministry of some fellow believer? Call that beloved child of God again to walk as a child of light and to focus on "what is pleasing to the Lord" [cf. **EPHESIANS 5:9, 10**].

The last reason I preach from a text such as this is that **I AM MAKING EVERY EFFORT** to "present you as a pure virgin to Christ" at His coming [cf. **2 CORINTHIANS 11:2**]. Even now, Christ presents you before the Father as people who are blameless and above reproach [cf. **COLOSSIANS 1:22**]; but I long to see each of you live in such a way that you glorify Him before the eyes of mankind. The commission I received from the Living God is "to make the Word of God fully known" [cf. **COLOSSIANS 1:25**]. That commission entails faithfully declaring the Word. By this means I will equip you for the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ [cf. **EPHESIANS 4:12, 13**]. Amen.