

Isaiah 8:18–22 — To the Law and to the Testimony

Isaiah's Children as Signs, Necromancy Condemned, and the Thick Darkness of Apostasy

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 8:18–22

“Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts which dwelleth in Mount Zion.

And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep and that mutter, should not a people seek unto their God? for the living to the dead?

To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.

And they shall pass through it hardly bestead and hungry, and it shall come to pass that when they shall be hungry, they shall fret themselves and curse their king and their God, and look upward. And they shall look unto the earth, and behold trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish, and they shall be driven to darkness.”

Isaiah and His Children as Signs

Verse 18 is quoted in Hebrews 2:13 in connection with the Lord Jesus and the company of those who are sanctified: “Behold, I and the children which God hath given me.” But it is important to observe how it is quoted there. There is no word of fulfillment. Matthew says “that it might be fulfilled” when he quotes Isaiah 9:1–2 in connection with the Lord’s coming to Galilee. No such statement is

made about verse 18. What is found in Hebrews 2 is the spirit of Christ in Isaiah's words — a beautiful application of the principle, not the prophetic fulfillment itself.

The children given to Isaiah who are for signs and wonders in Israel are, in the first place, his two sons: Shear-jashub (a remnant shall return) and Maher-shalal-hash-baz (swift for spoil, hasty for prey). Had Isaiah's children come in reverse order — judgment first, then mercy — the message would have been different. As it is, mercy precedes judgment: a remnant shall return is spoken before swift for spoil. And only half of verse 18 is quoted in Hebrews 2 — the words “for signs and wonders in Israel” are intentionally dropped, making plain that the prophetic application to Israel has its own future fulfillment in store, while the principle of the relationship finds its present expression in the Lord and those he is not ashamed to call his brethren.

Necromancy: Seeking the Dead for the Living

Verse 19 addresses what happens when a people in distress abandon the word of God and turn to necromancers and soothsayers — those who “chirp and mutter.” The very words chirp and mutter are instructive: what they deliver is not spoken plainly, openly, directly. It is something that was not intended to be heard clearly. It is occult knowledge — hidden, forbidden, craved by those who have shown contempt for the plain revelation of God.

The contrast with the law and the testimony is absolute. God has given clear revelation in his word. The soul that goes after occult knowledge is expressing dissatisfaction with that — a hunger for something secret, something that bypasses the word of God and the conscience. Those who do so are going to the dead on behalf of the living. It is the opposite of what ought to be: a people ought to seek their God.

The case of Saul gives the warning in its most vivid form. God had answered him not — not by dreams, not by Urim, not by prophets. What did Saul do? He sought a woman with a familiar spirit and went to her by night. The information he received was that the next day he and his sons would be among the dead. The only word given to a man who abandons the living God for the dead is a word of death. The greater the trouble of the nation of Israel under the Assyrian, the more tempting the resort to such things — and all the more devastating the result.

The safeguard is in verse 20: “To the law and to the testimony.” Not to the expert, not to the specialist in hidden knowledge, not to the one who claims access to secrets. To the word of God. Colossians 2:2–3 gives the New Testament answer to the same appetite: in Christ “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” The very thing that the occult seeker craves — hidden wisdom, secret knowledge — is found in Christ, openly revealed in the gospel. To seek it elsewhere is to bypass the treasure and hunt for counterfeits.

No Light in Them: The Test

The standard is given plainly: “If they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” In J.N. Darby’s translation: “for them there is no daybreak.” Light is connected throughout these chapters with the word of God and with the coming of Christ. The entrance of God’s word gives light. The Lord Jesus is the light of the world. And those who speak not according to this word have no daybreak — they are in darkness, and the darkness is internal as much as external.

God is light — that is not merely a statement about what God does but about what God is. The believer walks in the light as God is in the light, brought into that circle by grace. This is not a verse about walking according to the light, which is a separate and practical matter; it is about where the Christian walks. He is in the light. That is his place. And in that light, everything is seen for what it is.

Thick Darkness and What It Produces

The closing verses of chapter 8 describe the condition of those who have rejected the law and the testimony and followed the necromancers: they pass through it hard-pressed and hungry. Their hunger produces not repentance but fretfulness. They curse their king and their God and look upward — a gesture of complaint and accusation toward heaven rather than of petition and trust. They look at the earth and find trouble, darkness, dimness of anguish.

In J.N. Darby's translation: "they shall be driven into thick darkness." The darkness of Egypt, that ninth plague, was thick darkness — a darkness that could be felt. Some of that darkness is internal. Man in his moral darkness thinks he is advancing in knowledge; he learns facts about his environment, he becomes proficient in explaining the world around him, but he is in absolute darkness when it comes to the use and meaning of those things, and to the God who made them. The natural man with his learning stands in thick moral darkness and imagines it is light.

There is in Proverbs 30:8–9 a prayer that stands in healthy contrast to the fretfulness of these verses: "Remove far from me vanity and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain." The cursing of the king and God in verse 21 is what the prayer of Proverbs 30 seeks to avoid. Too much brings denial; too little brings theft and taking the name of God in vain. The middle path is dependency, and dependency is the path of the remnant.

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