

Isaiah & the New Testament

The Lord's Instruments and Our Spiritual Discernment

Scripture Readings

“Ah, the Assyrian, the rod of thine anger, and the staff in thine hand is mine indignation.” — Isaiah 10:5

*“As I have purposed, it shall stand — to break the Assyrian in my land.”
— Isaiah 14:24–25*

*“Ha! land shadowing with wings, which art beyond the rivers of Cush...”
— Isaiah 18:1*

*“The spiritual discerns all things... But we have the mind of Christ.” — 1
Corinthians 2:14–16*

*“Ye who are spiritual, restore such an one in a spirit of meekness.” —
Galatians 6:1*

“Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?” — Mark 4:40

*“Instead of calculating what our need requires, we ought rather to rest
on His knowledge and His sufficiency.” — Reflecting on John 6*

The Assyrian: God's Rod Against Israel

Isaiah's prophecy in chapters 7, 10, and 14 has its primary fulfilment in the coming day when Israel will no longer be depending upon God. They will have achieved outward security by their own wisdom and resources. There will be pride in what they have built — a pride not unlike that which was already visible

in the Lord's day, when Jews living under Roman rule said boldly, "We have never been servants to any man." Complete denial of what was plainly visible — but that is what pride does to a heart.

In that coming day the Lord will send the Assyrian against Israel as His rod of correction. The Assyrian, however, will have no thought of serving God's purposes. His heart will be set on extermination and plunder. He will say, "Are not my princes all kings?" — looking at the nations around him as merely the next conquest. He will use Israel's vulnerable moment for entirely self-interested reasons. And yet the Lord will allow him to act — for a time — because it accomplishes His purposes of chastening. Then the Lord will break the Assyrian in His land. Why? Because of the pride and sin that was in his heart.

How awful a position to occupy: to imagine that you are succeeding, only to discover that you were permitted for a season as an instrument in Another's hand, and then discarded. The Assyrian had no righteous thoughts, no communion with the Lord, no account at all of what God was doing. He was merely used.

The Unnamed Shadowing Nation: Isaiah 18

Chapter 18 introduces a different kind of instrument. A land "shadowing with wings," beyond the rivers of Cush — an unnamed nation, unknown to Isaiah's audience. If it had been a known nation the prophet would have named it. This nation wants to help. It sends swift ambassadors. It stirs up the world on behalf of Israel — this scattered and trodden-down people. In contrast to the Assyrian, these helpers have something sympathetic in their heart. They see a downtrodden people and they want to be a shadow over them, a protector.

But the Lord's response is striking. He says He will take His rest and observe from His dwelling place — like clear heat upon herbs, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest. He is not in this either. He sits aside and lets the nation do what is in its heart, because it also — like the Assyrian — is acting from self-interest and

without reference to His purposes. And in the end it will come to the same destruction.

We might apply this without claiming any specific identification: think of how the involvement of a powerful Western ally today does not help Israel nationally to repent and be brought back to God. It causes them, in Isaiah's language from chapter 6, to have ears that do not hear and eyes that do not see. The very protection that seems helpful in human terms actually deepens the spiritual blindness that the Lord is working to address.

The lesson for us is not that it is wrong to help those who are in need. It is that we must always be before the Lord in such things. The one who goes in like the Assyrian and adds his own blows to someone already under the Lord's rod is in a dreadful position. And the one who goes in like the unnamed nation, with genuine human compassion but without the Lord's will, is in a position that looks much better but ends the same. God's purposes will come to pass regardless of our involvement. But we do not want to be used and discarded. We want to be instruments of His will.

Spiritual Discernment: 1 Corinthians 2, Galatians 6, and 1 John 5

These two great examples from Isaiah — the Assyrian and the shadowing nation — are easy to judge from the outside. The Lord has told us what was in the Assyrian's heart. He has shown us that the do-gooders were equally self-willed. We can see it because the text lays it bare. But what about today? What about in our own assembly? What about when a brother or sister has been overtaken in a fault and is in need of restoration?

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2 that the spiritual man discerns all things. And in Galatians 6 he says specifically, "Ye who are spiritual, restore such an one in a spirit of meekness." Not all of us are spiritual in the sense the apostle intends. Not everyone's judgment carries equal weight. This is why the Scripture says,

“we do not count noses” in assembly matters. There is a story from some years ago of a brothers’ meeting where the question of restoration was before them. Some thought the sister was ready; she was visibly very sorry. But an older brother with discernment saw that it was sorrow for the trouble she had caused — not sorrow unto repentance before God. The matter was held until the assembly was satisfied that a full repentance had come. That took spirituality. It took someone exercised in discerning good and evil.

And that discernment does not come from nowhere. The one who says, “I want to be non-judgmental — I just want to do what I know is right for myself and not be involved in anyone else’s affairs” — that person has no training. How can someone have spiritual judgment about another’s condition if they have never developed the habit of applying principles of right and wrong to their own life? Spiritual discernment for the assembly is built on personal discernment, day by day.

As to 1 John 5:16, the question of a sin unto death exercised many when they were younger — which sin is it that if a believer commits it, he will die? But the surrounding context points us to the real answer: there is no list in Scripture to consult. What is required is the mind of Christ — the discernment of one who is spiritual. The same discernment that can see clearly whether a nation is acting in the Lord’s will or its own will is the discernment needed in the matter of prayer for a sinning brother.

The Storm on the Sea: Mark 4

The disciples were in the will of the Lord that evening on the Sea of Galilee — He Himself had said, “Let us pass over unto the other side.” They were not going on their own initiative. And Darby’s translation catches something the King James misses: they took Him “as He was” in the ship. As He was. Think of what that means — here was the Son of God, the perfect Servant, weary from a day of

ministry, and they took Him as He was. He did not send them out alone; He was in the ship with them.

And yet a great storm arose. Even in the will of the Lord, He allows storms to come. This is for our learning — and there is something pointed about the fact that these were experienced fishermen, men who had spent their lives on this sea. Sometimes the Lord allows us to be tested precisely in the areas where we seem most capable. Moses was the meekest man in all the earth, and it was there he failed. The disciples were seaworthy men, and it was precisely there that the Lord brought them to the end of their own resources.

In their desperation, they woke the Lord. He was asleep on a pillow in the stern — in perfect peace — while the seasoned fishermen were terrified. They had forgotten who was in the ship with them. And still they did not really know Him as they ought. They knew what He could do; they did not yet know Him in the full sense. But they cried out to Him, and He arose and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Peace, be still.” And there was a great calm. The question He left with them was, “How is it that ye have no faith?” Whatever capability or talent we may possess, we are brought ultimately to the place of owning that the Lord alone can come in for us. May we be quicker to remember He is in the ship.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand: John 6

In John 6 the disciples faced a different kind of insufficiency. There was no illusion here that they could manage on their own — five thousand hungry people and nothing to give them. The Lord asked Philip, “Whence shall we buy bread that these may eat?” And it says He asked this to prove him, for He Himself knew what He would do. He already knew. Philip’s answer was entirely in the realm of calculation: “Two hundred pennyworth of bread would not be enough.” Andrew went a little further: “There is a lad here with five barley loaves and two small fishes, but what are they among so many?” The faith was

there in a small measure, but still it collapsed under the calculation.

There is a remark that struck home in all of this: instead of calculating what our need requires, we ought rather to rest on His knowledge and His sufficiency. That is a word for the soul. When we are facing something that looks impossible — a situation where, no matter how we add up the resources, it is not enough — the answer is not to calculate more carefully. It is to turn to the One who knows all things and is sufficient for all things.

He made the men sit down. The grass was already there — He had seen to that ahead of time because He knew thousands would need to sit. He distributed the bread Himself; this was entirely His work. When they were filled — and He knew when they were filled — He told them to gather up the fragments. The twelve baskets were there too. He had provided them. Every detail of that scene was within His knowledge and under His hand. He knew what He would do.

In both these accounts — the storm and the feeding — the Lord would teach us two things: to remember that He is present with us, and to rest in His knowledge rather than relying on our own calculation. Consciousness of His presence produces dependence. Dependence produces spiritual discernment. And it is that discernment — the discernment of one who looks to the Lord in all things — that equips us to be truly useful to Him when He calls us to act.

“May our Lord give us to look to Him more — to seek His face, to be conscious of His presence, and thus to rely on His knowledge and His sufficiency.”