

Ps 23:1,2
Ps 32:3
Ps 27:1,2,3
Ps 18:1
Ps 109:13; Hy 58:1,2
Isaiah 12
Acts 2:42-47
Isaiah 12:2a

Yarrow, January 23, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Isaiah 12 forms the closing chapter of the section of Isaiah beginning at chap 6. We've spent some weeks listening to the Lord's words in chapters 6-11, and noticed there was much emphasis on God's holiness and hence on the judgment that must follow on the people's persistent sins. Yes, there were highlights of gospel in this section, particularly when the prophet announced that "to us a child is born" (9:6) and that "a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse" (11:1), but the general drift was certainly one of admonition and warning of impending doom on sin. In a word, the Lord was not pleased with His people.... Exactly for that reason chapter 12 is remarkable, and perhaps even surprising. For this chapter has such a positive ring to it and speaks so exuberantly of who God is and what He's done! How, we wonder, does this chapter fit with the previous chapters?? Why does Isaiah close this section of his prophecy in *this* way?

The question is important because of what it teaches us in the midst of our weaknesses. Specifically, precisely in the midst of weaknesses we can and may –and therefore must– keep singing songs of praise to God on account of who He is.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

JERUSALEM SINGS: GOD IS MY SALVATION.

1. What this song means.
2. Why this song is possible.
3. So what

1. What this song means.

Who, brothers and sisters, sings the words of our text? According to vs 1 "**you** will say." Similarly in vs 4: "In that day **you** will say." The prophet Isaiah labored in the city of Jerusalem, and so it is safe and proper to understand that the word 'you' refers to the people of Jerusalem.

You will recall from previous sermons, brothers and sisters, what the historical context was. Ahaz was king in Jerusalem on the throne of David, but he had no regard for the Lord God at all – and the people were OK with his godlessness. On account of the godlessness of king and people, the Lord (faithful as He is to His promises in the covenant) had Rezin king of Syria and Pekah king of Israel surround Jerusalem with their combined armies, and that reality obviously affected daily life in the city. The prophet Isaiah was allowed to tell Ahaz and Judah that God would deliver from the siege of these two kings, but a worse calamity would befall Jerusalem – for the vacuum these two kings left would be filled by the Assyrians, an enemy more formidable and deadly than the armies of Syria and Israel. Hence the billboard in Jerusalem, screaming Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, and the baby with the same name; the

Assyrians would be “Quick to the Plunder, Swift to the Spoil.” Not pretty! Chapter 10 even draws a picture of the Assyrian army getting progressively closer to Jerusalem, to the point that the people of the city can see the Assyrian soldiers shaking their fists at the city... (vs 32). Scary....

You’ll recall also what God promises to do to the bullying Assyrians. Isaiah 10:33: “See, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will lop off the boughs with great power. The lofty trees will be felled, the tall ones will be brought low.” We understand the point: the Lord as Divine Lumberjack will chop down the mighty tree of Assyria. More, as Chief Horticulturalist, the Lord will cause a shoot to come up from Jesse’s stump the Assyrians had left (11:1), and that shoot is of course Jesus Christ upon whom the Spirit of the Lord will come so that He will rule with wisdom and understanding (11:2) – and as a result there shall be such peace in His kingdom that “the wolf will lie down with the lamb” (11:6) – Paradise Restored. Wonderful news, exciting....

That’s the context, brothers and sisters, in which our text has its place. Given that promise about the shoot of Jesse we’re somehow not surprised to read Isaiah’s words in our text: “God is my salvation.” We read that sentence to mean that the Lord God has delivered His people from the dreaded Assyrians, and surely that’s reason for the people of Jerusalem to praise Him and to trust Him.

Now, it’s certainly true that the Lord alone could (and would) deliver Israel from the coming Assyrians. But here’s the question: what will the people of Jerusalem mean when they say that “God is my salvation?” To focus the question: what changes if the text would say, “God is my *Saviour*”? What’s the difference? Is a confession that God is my ‘salvation’ the same as a confession that God is my ‘Saviour’? Are the two in fact the same?

No, the two are not the same. A saviour is a person who brings about salvation. The saviour *does* something (he saves), and his product, the result of his work is salvation. The difference between ‘saviour’ and ‘salvation’ is the same difference as there is between a ‘builder’ and a ‘building’. The builder is the person who does something, and the building is the result of his labour.

The people of Jerusalem are going to say: “God is my salvation.” That is: God is the **building**, not the **builder**. (Of course, God is the builder too, God is the Saviour, but that’s not what will delight the people now.) So there’s the question: what does it mean that God is the building, is “my salvation”, instead of being the builder, the Saviour?

In the eye of my mind I can easily see the difference between a builder and a building. And I understand too that it’s the building, the house the builder built, that gives me warmth and protection. At the end of the day, it’s the **building** I need and appreciate, not the **builder** – and as long as the builder is busy I can’t enjoy the warmth and the protection that his building will provide. Similarly, it’s salvation I need and appreciate – and as long as the saviour is busy preparing his salvation I can’t enjoy the peace and safety this salvation will provide.

So we’re back to our question: what does Isaiah mean when he says that “God is my salvation”? He means, congregation, that God Himself *is* the building in which the saved find rest. He is not preparing comfort and safety for His own outside of Himself (as a builder builds a home for you and then he himself goes away); no, God is preparing comfort and safety for His own *within Himself*. The building, the safety, the salvation He’s preparing *is Himself*.

Allow me to change the analogy in order to drive the point home. The Bible speaks elsewhere of God being the Shepherd of His sheep (think of Ps 23). We understand that the shepherd leads his sheep to green pasture, and defends his sheep from wolves. But what’s he do with the lamb that’s been attacked? Yes, he fights off the wolf with his staff – and so is a saviour for that lamb. But he does more, for after he has saved the lamb he scoops it up in his arms and cradles it (cf Isaiah 40:11). It’s at that point that the lamb feels secure – for it now *has* salvation in the arms of its saviour; that shepherd has

become his salvation. That is the *feel* of deliverance, the warmth, security and safety the shepherd's arms represent.

This is the point Isaiah is getting at with the confession of our text. "God is my salvation" is to say that safety, security, is in God, more, *is* God Himself. God has wrapped His people so thoroughly in His arms that there is only peace, safety, salvation for them; they're so much in His bosom, so much *His*, that there is no threat left.

How remarkable – and how wonderful! Given the historical context, this song reflects glorious gospel. Here's deliverance from the invaders; more, here is such safety in God's arms that no future invader can touch God's own. Delightful!

Now the rest of vs 2 falls into place too. "I will trust and not be afraid" – indeed, anyone tucked into the arms of almighty God need never be afraid..., we understand that. The next part of vs 2 also falls into place: "the LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song." The LORD, upper case letters: yes, that's the almighty who established His covenant of love even with me. That I'm allowed to be wrapped up in His almighty arms gives me every reason to boast that He "is my strength", for the power of His mighty arm will surely protect me; His strength is mine, is for me. And that's why my songs shall be not about love or about loneliness or about longings but shall be about *Him*. He's not just rescued me *from* some trial and then left me open to further attack, but he's wrapped me up in His arms to protect me in time to come; He's not just built me a house wherein I feel safe (but it can burn down any day or floods ravage it or hostile authorities knock the door down), but he's made *Himself* my house so that no fire or flood or enemy can touch me. In the closing words of vs 2: "He has become my salvation" – or better: "he is to me salvation itself."

No wonder vs 3 can follow: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." That well is God Himself, and day by day in the ups and downs of life you can draw the water of life from the God who wrapped you in His arms; you lack nothing, nothing at all. The picture is so rich, the security so certain, the joy so deep. It's a picture we love.... And we want to sing it too....

That raises the next question: how's it possible to sing such a song? Hence our second point:

2. Why this song is possible.

It's the people of Jerusalem, says Isaiah, who will sing this delightful song. These people of Jerusalem were, we realize, sinners like we, with whom the Lord God established His covenant of grace – and they carried in their bodies the sign and seal of that covenant in circumcision. But these children of God by covenant did not make a point of living in agreement with that covenant.... According to chap 1, God was so turned off by the people's transgressions that He called the rulers of Jerusalem 'Sodom' and the people of Jerusalem 'Gomorrah' (1:10) – and He did that despite the countless sacrifices they presented to God in the temple. The God who lived in this temple, meanwhile, was utterly holy – as Isaiah saw in the vision of chap 6. Even angels hide their face from this glorious God while they endlessly cry out to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty" (6:2f). That contrast between God's holiness and the people's sinfulness led Isaiah to despair, "Woe to me! I am ruined!" Why? "I live among a people of unclean lips..." (vs 5). That's a radically different picture than the delightful confession of our text! On top of that, between this vision of chap 6 and the song of our text are five chapters revolving around the theme of those words posted on that billboard: Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz – words that prophesy of the covenant curses God shall pour down upon Jerusalem.... Then how O how is the song of our text possible?! That question is so very important simply because we want to confess too that "God is my salvation." And we know we're sinners too....

Note, then, beloved of the Lord, what the singer says in the second part of vs 1. “Although You were angry with me, Your anger has turned away and You have comforted me.” Yes, we’ve heard plenty about God’s anger on the people of Jerusalem in the previous chapters. But now Isaiah tells the people of Jerusalem that they will confess “in that day” that God’s anger has turned away. Why? What has prompted God’s anger to turn away?

Here, congregation, is simply the gospel of Jesus Christ as it was meant to be proclaimed in the temple of Jerusalem. It’s true that Ahaz closed the doors of that temple, and so silenced the official proclamation of the gospel. But the king’s unbelief does not change the reality of the gospel, nor does it hinder God from doing as He has promised in the gospel. That gospel is this: the sinner ought to die, but the animal dies *in place* of the sinner. That is: the righteous anger of God ought to fall upon the sinner and destroy him, but he is spared that judgment because God’s anger is turned away. This, of course, is the glorious gospel of forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. On the cross of Calvary the Lord God poured out the penalty *we* deserve on account of our sins, but it was Christ who received that penalty *in our place* – and Christ survived the crushing load of that anger, more, He atoned for sin and reconciled sinners to God. As the angel told Isaiah in the vision of chap 6 after he touched Isaiah’s lips with that burning coal from the temple’s altar: “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (vs 7).

That’s the good news, congregation, that lies behind the song of our text! God has become salvation for the sinners of Jerusalem so that they have security in His arms *because* of the work that Jesus Christ would do. Can you imagine: people God equates with Gomorrah get to sing that “God is my salvation” – and the reason is *not* that they through their repentance or good works have so impressed God as to earn the right to sing this song; the reason is instead *God’s mercy in Jesus Christ*. This is the gospel of free grace, where it all depends on the mercy of God – and that mercy is so abundant.

And that mercy, of course, is not limited to the people of Isaiah’s day. No, it will not do to place an ‘equals’ sign between the people of Jerusalem of long ago and we today; we’re not them. But it remains fact that our sins testify against us so that we have no right within ourselves to think of God as our Saviour, let alone to think of Him as our salvation. *And there’s nothing we can do to change God’s opinion about us!* Yet we too can sing that song of Isaiah 12 – not because of our works but because of His grace in Christ Jesus (cf Ephesians 2). This, congregation, is the very heart of the gospel: the living God, eternally holy, *is salvation* for sinners – and that by His grace alone! How marvellous, how gloriously marvellous!

3. So what.

An obvious consequence follows. Vs 4 puts it like this: the people of Jerusalem will tell each other to “Give thanks to the LORD, call on His Name.” More, the talk of the city will encourage each other to “make known among the nations what He has done.”

Remarkable. In Isaiah’s day the people of Jerusalem called themselves ‘Christian’ (let me say), but their religion was superficial, was all show – lots of sacrifices and prayers, but no heart in it. According to chap 5 the talk of the city was adding real estate (vs 8), where to find the better wine (vs 11), enjoying music and parties (vs 12) – and all of that without regard for the Lord God. That’s going to change to the degree that the talk is no longer about houses and beer and cars and sport, but the talk is going to be mutual encouragement to praise the Lord, is going to be about how to bring the gospel of His blessed identity as “my salvation” to the nations – and that will include those Assyrians who once surrounded and oppressed the city! More, the songs of the streets of Jerusalem will no longer be ditties

about love and longings and loneliness, but will be songs that extol the Lord God, songs built (if you will) on the Psalms of David, songs with the flavour of the Psalter, *God-centred* songs.

When did this happen? Undoubtedly, congregation, there were moments in the history of Jerusalem when the mood of the city was precisely as is described in Isaiah 12. Think of the relief in the city in the days of Hezekiah when 185,000 Assyrian soldiers were found dead outside the city walls. Think of the rejoicing in the days of King Josiah when the Book of the Law was found and the king led the people in celebrating the Passover. Yet it's especially the rejoicing of Acts 2 that we need to think about here, for that mood of the church follows directly on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Through Christ's work He has become our Immanuel, God with us – and that's to say that He's made Himself more than our Saviour; He's made Himself also our Shepherd who has us securely in His arms – He is our salvation, our security, our safety! He has poured out His Holy Spirit to fill His people with His presence – what glorious security that gives in the face of Satan's attacks! No wonder, then, that the church of Acts 2 “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching..., ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people” (vss 42,46f). The talk of the Pentecost church did not revolve around how to increase your holdings or where was the best restaurant, and it was not either about who won what game and where was fishing the best. But the talk was about God as my salvation, and the encouragement was to make this delightful gospel known among the nations. The songs they sang didn't come from the radio or from the pub, but came from the Scriptures because those songs revolved around the theme of God's identity as “my salvation”.

And yes, the effect of their songs and their talk was profound; the word of the Lord increased mightily in Jerusalem and ultimately to the ends of the earth. Even we got to hear of the wonderful work of God in Jesus Christ to undeserving sinners so that we too get to confess and to sing, “God is my salvation,” not because of our work or our effort but strictly because of God's infinite grace in Jesus Christ. So we have security in the face of life's pain and Satan's attacks; we're safe in the Father's sovereign arms. So we have something delightful to sing about, and something wonderful to talk about, and something infinitely rich to share with the peoples around us.

So here's the question that remains. What, in fact, are you singing about? With what lyrics do you hum along in your car and in your home? Songs that catch the theme of Isaiah 12?? And what drives your conversations? Is it the fine things and the fun of this life, or is it the sense of safety and security you feel because the Lord God is your salvation? What drives your thinking: the cares of this life or the delight of what God has done for you? Is mission, sharing the pleasures of the gospel with the comfortless, a big thing to you?

In a word: the song of Isaiah 12 highlights the infinite grace of sovereign God upon undeserving sinners. So great is the grace that sinners can't help but burst into songs of praise: “God is my salvation!”