

## Isaiah 18-20 “Striking and Healing”

### **Prayer for Illumination**

Only true God and God of all truth, how can we keep our way pure? By guarding it according to Your Word. As we seek You with a whole heart, let us not wander from your commandments! We desire to store up Your Word in our hearts, that we might not sin against You, for You are truly blessed. So, teach us your statutes that our lips may declare all the rules of Your mouth; that our hearts may delight in Your testimonies as much as in all riches; that we may meditate on your precepts and fix our eyes on Your ways. O Holy Spirit, cause us to delight in Your statutes, that we will not forget Your Word. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

### Read Isaiah 18-20

In these chapters God is giving Judah council on foreign policy. Judah is looking for the best possible way to survive the struggle over their land and surrounding territories. Assyria is encroaching on everyone, coming from the east and making their descent from the north. Egypt, to the south, is seeking to increase its influence. All of the smaller kingdoms are scrambling to ally with one another, or to pick a side between Egypt and Assyria. As we learn in chapter 20, the Philistines, represented by one of their major cities, Ashdod, had thrown in their lot with Egypt. This turned out to be a big mistake, as Sargon's elite guard overthrew Ashdod. This is a portent, Isaiah warns, of Assyria's later overthrow of the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, the Nubian or Cushite Dynasty, ruling Egypt into the mid seventh century. Cush, also known as Nubia, was a kingdom south of Egypt, which covered a vast territory, including modern day Ethiopia, but also much more than that. During the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, they conquered most of Egypt, including the major cities in Lower Egypt or the Delta region. They were the people “tall and smooth” who were “feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide.” Egyptian political chaos had once again resulted in foreigners ruling over them. In 20:3-6, after recording the

defeat of Egypt's ally in Philistia, Isaiah prophesies that the Egyptians will be led away as captives, the Cushites will go into exile, naked and barefoot. Not only will this be to Egypt's shame, it will be to the shame—verse 5—of all who put their hope on the Cushite dynasty of Egypt. Backing up to chapter 18, before all of this happens, we see envoys from this Cushite Dynasty, returning to Egypt from Judah. They had been to Judah to discuss an alliance between the two nations against Assyria. Whatever the terms of their departure from the King of Judah, Isaiah has a message from the LORD that they are to carry back to Egypt. They are to tell this message, not just to the Egyptians, but to every tribe and nation they encounter on their return. It's a message of judgment, that the LORD will act with quiet providence, like the clear heat of the sun, or like an imperceptible cloud of dew in the heat of harvest, to cut Egypt down. Just before the harvest is brought in, the LORD will devastate the fields. This is a picture of how the LORD will bring Egypt down, just when they're at ease and secure—at the height of their enjoyment of life. At the end of chapter 18, the envoys of Egypt are told to let the nations know that when all has fallen out as God has determined—Egypt is brought down and their allies are dismayed, then they will turn to the LORD of hosts, they will seek their life and happiness at Mount Zion, the place of the name of the LORD of hosts. So, Egypt, like all the nations, is no safety for Judah. Indeed, *Egypt's* safety will be found in *Judah's* God, the LORD of hosts. As Judah is looking at the options for its own survival in this political melee, which included, not only Egypt/Nubia and Assyria, but also the Philistines, the Moabites, the Syrians, and the Chaldeans, to name just the ones that Isaiah mentions, they have envoys coming from various administrations seeking alliances or threatening trouble. As they look to Egypt, which the Israelites were prone to do, they are considering the differing parties and possible alliances, when Isaiah comes along and says, "Don't trust any of the parties. They are unreliable. Their only hope is to trust in your God! Don't you get it yet? The only salvation for the nations is the God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Holy One of Israel. Why," Isaiah seems to ask, "would you put your trust in Egypt, when Egypt's hope is found among you—in your God?" Judah was not to be looking to the nations, whether Egypt, Assyria, Ephraim, or Da-

mascus, for salvation. Instead, they were to be showing the nations, through their trust in the LORD, that salvation for all nations is found in the LORD their God. Isaiah unfolds this message in detail in chapter 19, between the two announcements of judgment in chapters 18 and 20. In the first 15 verses of chapter 19 we see Egypt's descent into the grave under the judgment of God, then in verses 16-25 we see Egypt's ascent from the grave through the salvation of the LORD. Not only so, we see also the salvation of Israel and even Assyria, as God works out His purpose to bless all the nations through the promised seed of Abraham.

As we look at Isaiah's development of this theme in chapter 19, let us hear God's message to the Church today: **You, the Church, are not to look to the world for salvation, but you are to show the world that salvation is found in Christ alone.** The confusion and chaos around us can be very daunting, making life difficult. Economic uncertainty, sexual insanity, wars and rumors of wars, the breakdown of the family, the redefinition of the family, the redefinition of humanity, terrorism, the loss of freedom in "the land of the free," and a host of other temptations and fears surround us. How we face such challenges speaks to a watching world. Where we find our safety from the fallout of human sin sends a message. Where do you turn when you have been wronged and suffered injustice? Who or what determines your response? How do you deal with job loss or a cut in hours or pay? How do you deal with your own sin, corruption, and brokenness? The world offers us all sorts of "saviors." "Just join our alliance, and we'll insure your survival," says the secularist guild, or the spiritualist guides, or the social gurus. But God's prophetic Word says, "Church, do not look to the world for salvation, but show the world that salvation is found in trusting in Christ alone.

**First,** Isaiah would argue that **you must not look to the world for salvation (19:1-15).** He does this by showing that everything the world boasts of is a mirage that will leave the thirsty traveler with a mouthful of sand. The world's religion is death, the world's wealth is unreliable, and the world's wisdom is folly. These are the very

things for which Egypt of antiquity was so well known. And they sound strangely familiar as the vanities of our own day as well.

The golden calf that Aaron made for Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai betrays the influence of Egypt on the Israelites. It was not only their gold and silver that the Israelites took when they plundered the Egyptians during the exodus. They carried in their hearts the seeds of idolatry and polytheism, divided loyalty to multiple gods. As they face the bewildering international scene, they are again tempted to look to the gods of Egypt, each god or goddess with his or her own domain. Isaiah shows how foolish this treachery against the LORD really is, because **the world's religion is polytheistic confusion and death (19:1-4)**. Echoing the execution of judgment on Egypt's gods, which God carried out during the exodus, Isaiah says, "Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; and the idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence" (v. 1). The prophets sometimes mock the idols as lifeless blocks of wood and stone, but at other times, they acknowledge that there is some spiritual reality behind idolatry. In the New Testament, Paul takes the same approach as he says that we know that an idol is nothing (1 Cor. 8:4), on the one hand, but, on the other hand, what the Pagans worship through their idols are actually demons (1 Cor. 10:20). So there is a spiritual reality behind Egypt's idols, but their impotence is revealed when the only true God bears His righteous right arm. In fact, the word that Isaiah uses, which the ESV translates "idols" is a favorite prophetic term for the false gods, which is more closely translated as "vanities" or "little nothings."<sup>1</sup> The gods of the nations are something, but compared to God they are nothings. Egypt's civil strife with rival dynasties and contradictory foreign policies, with one group wanting to appease Assyria, another wanting to meet them in battle, and others just hoping that ignoring them will make them go away, is a reflection of the competing vanities of Egypt's many gods. Polytheism has no unifying reality. The gods conflict with one another. Their devotees live out that conflict as one group lusts for more lands, another group prefers tranquility, while yet

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<sup>1</sup> אֱלִיל (elil).

another will support whatever program allows them greater luxury. The competing desires within any one man are enough to try the mettle of any negotiator. Now raise that to the Nth power and you have the conflicting interests within a body politic. Without a unifying factor, the life of the individual as well as the society will eventually shatter into little bitty pieces. The lie of secularism is that it has done away with all the ancient gods of the primitive peoples of the earth. The truth is, secularism has not demythologized reality; they have merely renamed the gods, giving each a name ending in –ology or –ism. Secular humanism is the prevailing philosophy of the day. This is not atheistic. It is the height of idolatry—humanity worshiping itself. We have not only secularism, but also the mystical allure of eastern religions and philosophies. I am not convinced that Yoga can be divested of its religious and philosophical associations. And Christians who think they can use eastern meditation to achieve balance in their lives and have a deeper experience of life or of God, are opening themselves to dangerous spiritual influences. In whatever shape or form, or under whatever name, the world’s religions, denying the One true God who exists eternally as three Persons, Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, are nothing more than polytheistic confusion and death. The end for those who look to such gods is found in verses 2-3: “I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians, and they will fight, each against another and each against his neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom; and the spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out, and I will confound their counsel; and they will inquire of the idols and the sorcerers, and the mediums and the necromancers.” These lost souls will inquire of the dead on behalf of the living. How could such a religion end in anything other than death?

Not only the world’s religion, but Isaiah also warns against trusting in the world’s wealth. In verses 5-10, he shows that **the world’s wealth and power is fragile and unreliable**. The Nile River is Egypt. Without it, the Sahara Desert would swallow Egypt whole. God says that Egypt’s whole economy will come crashing down with but a turn of the spigot. What was once lush land irrigated by the mighty overflowing banks of the Nile will be a parched stench littered with the corpses of fish, crocodiles, and creeping things that once

teemed in those waters. The fishermen, who made their living from those waters, will mourn and lament, “they will languish who spread their nets on the water” (v. 8). Other industries, such as combed flax and woven cotton will fold in economic collapse. The country, so rich in resources, the “Gift of the Nile,” the “Land of the Pharaohs,” will be devastated. “The pillars of the land will be crushed, and all who work for pay will be grieved” (10). One simple natural disaster at just the right place can bring down a mighty empire. One foolish decision by an administration can undo all the labor of generations of nation builders. We’re constantly reminded of how fragile our lives really are. I can’t tell you how many times, as a child, I slammed my body and sometimes my head on the asphalt when skateboarding, bicycling or just goofing off with my friends. And then I heard of a little boy who fell off of his bicycle and hit his head on the curb, and that was it. His life was over. I couldn’t help but flashback to all the times I cracked my head on something, and thank God that I’m still in once piece, even if I am a bit of a slow thinker. These mighty nations, with their arsenals of “divine” inventions for their defense, with their advanced technology, extraordinary medical science, and massive economic pillars undergirding it all, are just as fragile as that little child falling off of his bicycle. Paul said, “The weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:25), indeed, “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27). Don’t be deceived by the strapping King Saul, who stood a head taller than all the men of Israel, because when Goliath throws down the gauntlet, it will be a despised shepherd-boy who will take it up, not the “mighty King.” Do not look to the wealth of the nations for your security. Do not trust this government or any government apart from Christ to be your salvation. The world’s wealth and power is fragile and unreliable. O how we need to hear the instruction of Paul to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:17, “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.”

Not only the world’s religion and wealth, but also the world’s wisest counselors, are a false hope. In verses 11-15, Isaiah tells us that **the world’s wisdom is folly because it does not begin with the fear of**

**the LORD.** The princes of Zoan, renowned for their wisdom, are utterly foolish. “The wisest counsellors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel!” (v. 11). Isaiah castigates Egypt’s wise men as deluded fools, who cause Egypt to stagger, men who are full of a spirit of confusion who make Egypt stagger like a drunken man passing back and forth through his own vomit (v. 14). In verse 15, he says that for all of the nation’s Ivy League law school graduates running the country, no one can do anything for Egypt. They can’t solve their nation’s problems, much less yours, for one simple reason, given in verse 12; they don’t know the mind of God. “Let them tell you that they might know what the LORD of hosts has purposed against Egypt.” Proverbs 26:12 says, “Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” If ever there was a generation that epitomized being wise in its own eyes, and doing what is right in their own eyes, we are living in it. I’m telling you on the authority of God’s word, beloved, you cannot trust the wisdom of this world. The prevailing wisdom of this generation is the same as that which looked upon the Son of God, judged Him a criminal, scourged Him, mocked Him, and crucified the Lord of glory. The world considers God’s plan to redeem sinners through the crucified Christ as utter folly. But, says Paul, “The foolishness of God is wiser than men. . . . God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. . . . The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are Spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 1:25, 27; 2:14). The world refuses to be instructed by the Spirit of God from the Word of God, and so their best wisdom is shameful folly. Beloved, do not go to the psychologists of the world. They are the priests of secularism. They will counsel you to have a well-adjusted life in society without God, without Christ. Does it matter if your financial advisor is a Christian or not? Well, if all you are interested in is laying up treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, I suppose not. But if you desire to lay up treasures in heaven, and to seek first the kingdom of God, then I suggest that you find a financial advisor who understands and follows the values of the kingdom of God. Whose wisdom will you turn to for life’s crossroads. Should I get a divorce? Who will you go to for counsel? The world that says, “Hey, if you

don't feel anything for him any longer, then don't waste another moment of your life with him"? Or will you listen to the One who said, "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder"? Remember, beloved, the happiness that the world offers is a mirage, a mouthful of sand. They make it all look and sound so right, so good. But it's a lie. The world's wisdom is folly because it does not begin with the fear of the Lord.

Isaiah's message begins with a sober warning: You must not look to the world for salvation. The world's religion is death, the world's wealth is unreliable, and the world's wisdom is folly. Then he proceeds to show us the way forward, not only for ourselves, but for the watching world.

In verses 16-25, Isaiah shines this bright light out of the darkness of the world's chaos: **You will show the world that salvation is found in Christ alone.** In five steps Isaiah takes us from Egypt's collapse, through Egypt's humble acknowledgement of the LORD and His Christ, their confession that Jesus is Lord, their worship and witness to the LORD, their experience of the LORD as their Savior, Father and Healer, and the international blessing that flows from Christ to Egypt and to all the nations, anticipating Jesus' command to His church, "Go, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19).

The first step on Egypt's ascent from the grave of rebellion against God is found in verses 16-17. **The world will be humbled by fear of the LORD and His Christ.** The Egyptians, with the elect of all the nations, must come to see the justice of God against their sin. Until we know that we have offended against the holiness and righteousness of God, we have no impetus to seek forgiveness from Him. This is a serious problem in our day. The secularists have done all they can to do away with the very notion of guilt. Guilt, they say, is a nasty holdover from our primitive ancestors that was once necessary to keep humanity from killing itself off in its infancy. But now that we have matured, we must see guilt for what it is, an unnecessary mechanism to prevent us from living to our soul's satisfaction.

For this reason, the Holy God of the Bible, who has a righteous law that is to be obeyed, must be buried along with the notions that there is any objective truth or absolute morality. This is only the latest attempt of humanity to concertedly “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). Sadly, the Church has facilitated this preaching of false peace by remaining silent about the law of God. We have become practical antinomians, ignoring Jesus’ words that “until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:18-19). The land of Judah becoming a terror to Egypt, no doubt alludes to Kings of Judah who would subject the surrounding nations, but has its ultimate fulfillment in that Son of David, Jesus Christ who would rule the nations with a rod of iron. It is of Him that Paul speaks to the Athenians, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31). Who would not tremble to learn that the One they had mocked as an imposter and murdered in unbelief had risen from the dead? And shall we now allay their fears with a truncated gospel that merely says, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life”?

When people are brought, like the Egyptians, to “fear because of the purpose that the LORD of hosts has purposed against them” because of their sin, then they can be brought to the second step on the ascent from the grave. From verse 18 we learn that **the world will confess that Jesus is LORD**. Five cities speaking the language of Canaan is a poetic way of saying that they will swear their allegiance to the LORD of hosts. I follow the most ancient Hebrew texts and the various versions of the ancient world over the medieval text of the Jewish Masoretic scribes in reading “City of the Sun” in verse 18, instead of “City of Destruction.” The reference is to Heliopolis, the city of the chief deity, the sun god, Re. Here, in the least likely

place, Egyptians will swear their allegiance to the LORD! This can only be a work of God's grace. When Jesus said that the rich can scarcely enter the kingdom of heaven, that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, His disciples marveled, and asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus said, "With man this is impossible. But with God, all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). The nations are not brought to this confession in any great numbers until the coming of Jesus, the King of the Jews, yes, but also, the Ruler of Kings on earth (Rev. 1:5).

Continuing the ascent from sin's degradation to God's new creation, **the world will worship and bear witness to the LORD** (19:19-20a). In the patriarchal narratives of Genesis, Abraham built altars all throughout Canaan as a way of claiming the territory for the LORD, and sanctifying it for the worship of the LORD. It was a bold statement in the face of the gods of the Canaanites. Now we read that Egypt will have an altar to the LORD smack dab in the middle of the land! Egypt is set apart for the worship of the true and living God! When the two-and a half tribes of Israel went to settle in the Transjordan region, after the conquest of Canaan, they set up a pillar on the west side of the Jordan and explained that it was to be a memorial on the border between their tribes and the tribes on the Canaan side of the Jordan River, to bear witness to coming generations that they also belong to the people of the LORD. Just because we are on the other side of the river doesn't mean that we are any less loyal to the God of our fathers. We read in verse 19 that a pillar to the LORD is to be erected at the border of Egypt, and in verse 20 that it will be a sign and a witness for the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt. Egypt wants to tell the world that it belongs to the LORD! Really folks, how can someone come to know God's grace and not want to tell the world?

After their ascent from the grave Egypt would come to know the same covenantal love and faithfulness that Israel had experienced under God's gracious election. In verses 20-22 we see that **the world will know the LORD as Savior, Father, and Healer**. The nations, and those within the nations, who turn to the LORD can ex-

pect the hostility of those nations and people who do not turn to the LORD. The light of truth and holiness always irritates the eyes that have grown accustomed to the darkness. Like the saints of old, the Egyptians will have the privilege of suffering for the sake of Christ. Like the Apostles they can rejoice that they were counted worthy to suffer for His sake. Yet, they also have this assurance, that God hears their cry for deliverance. Just as God raised up judges to deliver Israel of old, so He will deliver His people, the Egyptians. They will know God as their Savior. They will know His Fatherly discipline, as He strikes them, only in order to heal them. They will know the one who heals their souls and their society. The world will be at peace under the blessing of the LORD (19:23-25).

When we come to verses 24-25 we see a most glorious fulfillment of that promise that God made to Abraham: “through your seed, I will bless all the nations of the earth” (Gen. 22:18). “In that day”—here is that language of last things, latter days, in which God’s promises will come to fruition, His Word will come to full bloom, His Kingdom will come on earth. These days have already begun with the first advent of Christ, and they will be consummated at His royal coming. Here we read “In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth.” Now just take that in in the light of the historical circumstances in which Isaiah was writing this prophecy. Egypt and Assyria were bitter rivals, and they were playing tug-of-war with Israel and all the smaller states in the Levant. And yet Isaiah sees the day when these heathen, God-defying, rapacious nations will share fully with Israel in God’s covenantal blessing! It’s Israel, specifically, who is spoken of as “a blessing in the midst of the earth.” The New Testament is at great pains to demonstrate that Jesus Christ is the embodiment of Israel. The Gospel of Matthew, which opens the New Testament, makes this very plain with its carefully chosen quotations of the Old Testament followed or preceded by fulfillment formulas. Paul, perhaps, makes the clearest statement concerning this, in Galatians 3:16: “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his seed. It does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your seed,’ who is Christ.” So the promise to bless the nations through

the seed of Abraham is not with reference to the political policies of Israel in Isaiah's lifetime, or to the military domination of the region under Maccabean independence. The fulfillment is not in the nation as a body politic, but in the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. And how does Jesus, the true Israel of God, the Seed of Abraham, bring God's blessing to the nations? Paul tells us in Galatians, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14). The only hope of salvation for the nations, and our only hope, is found in the Lord Jesus, who bore our sins in His body on that tree, who suffered the curse of God in His own glorious Person, so that we might receive blessing, the promised Holy Spirit as the guarantee of our eternal reward.

In Isaiah, Egypt and Assyria represent the worst that the world has to offer. And yet, in Christ, the true Israel, they share in the blessing. Now we are prepared for these amazing and scandalous words in verse 25, "whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance.'" "My people" and "the work of My hands" were the special designations of Israel as God's chosen people, who shared in the Covenant of Grace under Abraham, Moses, and David. But looking forward to the New Covenant, Isaiah says, even Egypt and Assyria will be called by this name. Amazing! God's inheritance in the saints is not only in Israel and Judah, but in those who are called from every tribe and people and language and nation.

This is the message we are called to deliver to our generation. This is why Isaiah insists that **we, the Church, must not look to the world for salvation, but show the world that salvation is found in Christ alone.** He says "show" the world. Yes tell them. But also show them by refusing to follow the world's way to healing, rejecting the false gods and the false peace of the world, and embracing the cross as your redemption. Show them that man's wisdom is folly by walking in the ways of the Lord, especially when those ways run contrary to the currents of culture.

When men have been disappointed by their godless alliances and worldly confidences and cry out in the words of chapter 20 verse 6 “Behold, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped and to whom we fled for help to be delivered from the king of Assyria! And we, how shall we escape?” may they be compelled by your life to ask about the hope that is in you. And may you be ready to give them the answer—In Christ Alone.

Let us pray:

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who spoke through the prophets, who spoke in these last days through Your Son, God of the Promise, always faithful to Your Word, always true to Your people, indeed, even if we are faithless, You remain faithful, for You cannot deny Yourself, our God and Father, our Savior and Healer, fix in us Your humble dwelling, and by this Word prepare us for our eternal dwelling with You. In that glorious Name above all names, the Name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.