

Text: Isaiah 17:1-11

Title: "The cure for incurable pain"

Time: 3/8/2026 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Some of you know that I am a cancer survivor. I was thankful for your prayers when I was a cancer patient. Because of the Lord's gracious answers to our prayers, I am not currently a cancer patient.

We pray every Sunday for others who are still cancer patients. As our list grows longer over the weeks, we may wonder whether there shall ever be a cure for cancer, a day when we no longer have to pray for cancer patients with any more perseverance than we would pray for someone with a common cold. That day, of course, has not yet come.

Great progress in cancer treatments has been made, however, in answer to our prayers for cancer patients. In 1980, our nation lost 207.9 out of every 100,000 Americans to cancer. In 1990, that number peaked to its highest level at 216 cancer deaths out of every 100,000 Americans. In that year, cancer caused nearly 25% of those who died in our nation.

But since 1990, the rate of cancer deaths has decreased every year so that by the year 2020, our nation was down to 144.1 cancer deaths per 100,000 people. On average, Americans were 33% less likely to die of cancer than they were in 1990. As a cancer survivor, I am thankful for that progress. We need to keep praying for that needed cure.

In verse 11 of our passage, Isaiah mentions an incurable pain (ESV). Those are the last two words of his burden for Damascus, the capital of Syria, also called Aram in Isaiah's day. Our KJV uses the words *desperate sorrow* to translate

the Hebrew here. What makes pain or sorrow desperate in this case is its incurability.

But though Isaiah warns about incurable pain, like a doctor warning about a terminal disease, he does so offering people a true cure for what he describes as incurable. As with many terminal diseases, we find in Isaiah's message that the true cure is early detection and prevention. The incurable pain is due to man's unbelief, and the cure that detects and prevents this result is God's salvation.

As Isaiah diagnoses this need of the human heart, he tells us about those who need this cure, about those who shall find this cure, about the One who is the cure, and about the tragic way the need for the cure becomes incurable for many.

I. Those who need this cure (vv. 1-3a).

Illustration: 2 Kings 5 tells the story of a proud resident of Damascus who had come down with the incurable disease of leprosy. His name was Naaman, and he was the commander of the army of Syria. His wife had an Israeli servant girl who counseled her master to visit the prophet Elisha, who was known in Israel as one whom the Lord used to do mighty miracles.

Desperate for a cure, Naaman followed this advice, bringing stores of riches to pay for his healing. Elisha sent his servant to tell Naaman to keep his payment and to go to the Jordan River and dip himself in the river seven times.

Naaman's initial reaction to this instruction was arrogant disgust, which spoke of his national pride in the glory of Damascus: "'Aren't Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of

Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?" So he turned and left in a rage" (v. 12). Other servants convinced Naaman to think better of Elisha's direction, so Naaman ultimately obeyed and was cleansed.

Application: Those events happened in the 9th century B.C. during a time when Syria and Ephraim, northern Israel, were enemies at war. Isaiah is writing about 100-150 years later, after a time that Ephraim had joined Syria in opposition to Assyria.

With the death of prophets like Elisha, the northern ten tribes of Israel fell further and further into apostasy, to the point that they relied on a former enemy more than on the Lord. Our passage mentions this linkage by listing Damascus, then Aroer – a town in Israel's northern tribe of Gad, then Ephraim – referring to all of northern Israel, and then Damascus again (vv. 1-3a). Isaiah's burden for Damascus had become equally his burden for these people of Israel.

Damascus fell in 732 B.C. to the Assyrians, and Samaria, the capital of northern Israel, would fall ten years later in 722 B.C.. It is possible that Isaiah's message was given as a warning to Ephraim in those intervening ten years. Either way, those who needed the cure for incurable pain were both Damascus, the Gentile nation, and Ephraim of Israel.

Those who need the cure from incurable pain were not just this heathen Gentile nation of warriors like Naaman, but also the northern nation of Israel that had heard from mighty prophets like Elijah and Elisha and now Isaiah. This is the truth that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

In Romans 1 Paul speaks of heathen people as lost and under the wrath of God, who have never heard of a Bible, exposed only to the witness of creation. In chapter 2 Paul speaks of religious people, well versed in the teachings of the Bible, as equally lost and under the wrath of God. Everyone needs the cure for incurable pain offered by Isaiah. You and I are included as sinners who need this cure, whether we come from a place like heathen Damascus or a place like religious Ephraim.

Everyone needs this cure, but sadly not everyone finds it.

II. Those who shall find this cure (vv. 3b-6).

Illustration: The Lord Jesus mentioned Naaman in His teaching about those who find the cure for incurable pain: "Many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was saved, saving Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:27). That truth put that way angered his fellow attendees at the Nazareth synagogue that Sabbath Day, and it did so because Jesus was pointing out who truly finds the cure, saying that it was not them. Luke tells us they tried to throw Jesus over a cliff and kill Him for His truth-telling, but His time had not yet come.

Application: If you were a member of that synagogue, it would have been astonishing for you to hear that the Messiah, for whom you had hoped all the days of your life, just said that Naaman was cured, but not you. It would seem unreasonable to you that so few would be saved, and those few from such strange places. Sinful men prefer to believe that everyone is ok and shall be saved in the end.

But it was Isaiah's scroll that was read as authoritative truth in the synagogue of Nazareth that Sabbath Day. Isaiah teaches in our passage that those who shall find the cure are

few, a mere remnant, and they come from both Damascus and from Israel (v. 3b). The synagogue of Nazareth thought the glory of Israel would be large enough to include them all (and not any Gentiles), but Isaiah said that glory of Israel would become small (just like the Gentiles) (v. 4).

Illustration: When a field is harvested, there is not much usable grain left over. When an olive tree is shaken or a fruit tree is plucked, there are very few olives and pieces of fruit left, and only in the very high branches (vv. 5-6).

And so the warning of Isaiah to us this morning about who finds the cure is the same warning of the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount about who finds the way to life eternal: "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matt. 7:13-14). Those verses come after verse 12, which is the popular "Golden Rule." We must not stop reading at verse 12.

May not one of us this morning fail to find the narrow way Jesus and Isaiah point to. We learn from them both that this way to the cure of eternal life is a person, not a religion.

III. The One who is the cure (vv. 7-8).

Application: The Lord Jesus not only said, "narrow is the way," but also "I am the way" (John 14:6). Isaiah tells us that the way is the Lord. We must look to Him for salvation (v. 7a). Psalm 119:117 teaches that we must look to His statutes, His Word, with the same eyes of faith: "Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe: and *I will have respect unto thy statutes continually.*" We find the Lord in His Word.

To obtain the cure of salvation, we must confess that the Lord is our Maker (v. 7). He is our Maker not only as our Creator, but also as our Redeemer, making us not only people, but also His people: "For thy Maker is thine husband; the Lord of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel. The God of the whole earth shall he be called" (Isa. 54:5).

We must repent of our unbelief, which has set up ourselves as our own god-maker (v. 8). The eyes of faith of a repentant sinner look to the Lord in the way described by Psalm 123:2, "Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until that he have mercy upon us."

Perhaps you embrace the label *Christian* this morning, but are your eyes these eyes of faith looking to their Master? Have you truly found that the Lord is the way, the truth, and the life, because He became man and died on the cross for your sins? Do you look to Him as your Maker and Master, seeking that He should have mercy on you?

Or are you in league with the unbelief of the synagogue of Nazareth, who could not accept the exclusive claims of Christ? Is your reaction still the initial pride of Naaman, repulsed by the prophet's direction that he be baptized in the Jordan River? May I be like Naaman's servants and ask you to reconsider? Only one is the cure – Jesus Christ. He said, "No man comes unto the Father but by Me" (John 14:6).

IV. How the needed cure becomes incurable (vv. 9-11).

Illustration: My cure to cancer was a blessing that came through early detection. Had I not put off the detection

procedure as long as I did, I may not ever have had cancer in the first place. But it was found at stage one and removed through surgery without further complications. There is a point at which cancer becomes incurable, and this is true also about the sin of sinners.

Application: Much of verses 10 and 11 describe a Canaanite worship practice. Illustrating the fertility they hoped their false gods would send their fields, their flocks, and themselves, they would plant these gardens in tribute to them. Isaiah says that in the end, such confidence in false man-made religion brings a truly huge harvest of incurable pain.

It brings this harvest after unbelievers forget the God of their salvation and the Rock of their refuge (v. 10a). Forgetfulness is very important to the sustenance of unbelief. An unbeliever must forget the God-shaped void he finds in his life every time he is willing to look. He must forget to find answers to all the most important questions of his existence - what am I, where did I come from, to where am I going.

An unbeliever must forget the illogic of making for himself the god that he will worship. And to forget any of this, he must first forget that the true God has revealed Himself to him in His holy Word. He must forget to read his Bible. He must avoid being in a worship service where Isaiah 17 is preached. Many have forgotten to be here today.

It is clear that a great part of the tragedy of this burden of Isaiah, which addresses the need of both Damascus and Ephraim, both the unchurched and the churched, both the atheist and the religious, is the fact that forgetting the God of salvation is forgetting the God of your salvation, forgetting the Rock of refuge is forgetting the Rock of your refuge.

The harvest of incurable pain is the final result of a sinner's unbelief in spite of the truth that Jesus is the God of his salvation and the Rock of his Refuge.

Conclusion: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:16-18).

Jesus died for your sins. According to Isaiah, the Lord is your Savior and your Refuge. If you are condemned this morning, it is because you will not believe, not because He is not a sufficient Savior. Will you repent of your unbelief and believe today?

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*