

Text: Isaiah 20:1-6

Title: "The answer to 'How shall we escape?'"

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Introduction: A couple of weeks ago, a California man attempted to break into a closed coffee shop from its roof. The project went badly, and the man fell 22 feet into a wall and was stuck there for ten hours. Firemen eventually came to cut into the wall and rescue the man, but then the police arrested him for attempted burglary. This experience has undoubtedly taught the thief the importance of the question at the end of our chapter: "How shall we escape?" He first needed help escaping the wall, and he now needs help escaping the burglary charges against him.

The question is certainly a good one, and Isaiah wants Judah to remember that he had prophesied a day in which all of their neighbors along the Mediterranean coast of Palestine would be asking this question – "How shall we escape?" Specifically, their experience had taught them to ask, "How shall we escape Assyria?" There was a time in which those inhabitants had an answer to their question – "We will escape Assyria with Egypt's help." That answer failed in 701 B.C. at the Battle of Eltekeh. It was then that Assyria carried Egyptians and Cushites into captivity, both naked and barefoot, as Isaiah had prophesied in this chapter.

The year mentioned in verse 1 was ten years earlier. In 711 B.C. Sargon II sent his Tartan or second-in-command to Ashdod of the Philistines to crush their rebellion. Ashdod had been conquered previously by Assyria, but in 713 B.C., Ashdod rebelled under their king Azuri. To deal with the rebellion, Assyria deposed Azuri and set up his brother Achimit in his place, who was loyal to Assyria. The Philistine cause of independence did not stop, however. Instead, they deposed the traitor Achimit and installed a new king called Jaman.

Eventually, Jaman was forced to flee from the Assyrians to Egypt, who eventually betrayed him by turning him over to the Assyrians. It is likely this feature of Egyptian unreliability about which the Assyrians reminded Hezekiah years after Egypt had been defeated (cp. 2 Kings 18:21, "Now, behold, thou trustest upon the staff of this bruised reed, even upon Egypt, on which if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it: so is Pharaoh king of Egypt unto all that trust on him.") Jaman was one of those betrayed this way.

So, the question, "How shall we escape Assyria?" still stands unanswered by the Philistines and their coastal allies as Isaiah records this warning to his home Judah. It was a warning that lasted three years (v. 3), likely from 711 B.C. to 708 B.C..

In the previous chapter, Isaiah told of an almost unbelievable time, during which Assyria, Egypt, and Judah would worship the Lord together. To underscore that what seems unbelievable to us must be viewed as credible when the Lord says it, Isaiah reminds Judah in this chapter of another outcome that the Lord predicted, which seemed incredible at the time.

When Isaiah delivered the message of Egypt's demise in chapter 20, it seemed unbelievable. Egypt was too powerful, too reliable, too necessary for Isaiah's message about their coming defeat to be true. And yet, just a few years later, it happened just as Isaiah said it would. In the same way, we will look back some glorious day on what Isaiah has said about God's kingdom in chapter 19 and know then that His promise was true.

Isaiah's God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think, according to the power that works within us (Eph. 3:20). We must never doubt this truth. Isaiah's faithfulness to God's truth is a great example to us.

But this truth still leaves the Philistine question unanswered, "How shall we escape?" "We shall escape through Egypt" was their false answer, that is clear enough from our passage, but is

there a true answer? In the end, the answer is “yes.” God does have the true answer about how we can escape the demise that ruined the enemies of Assyria, and I want us to see three ways to find His answer.

I. Listen to God’s servant to escape (vv. 2-3).

Illustration: A couple of weeks ago, Maureen and I were introduced to Ken Lawson and his wife Vera by friends of ours from India. We were at The Pressed Café for lunch together, and when we met my friend Johnson said, “This is my friend, Ken,” and Ken said, “This is my wife Vera.”

Application: Now imagine with me that it was not my friend Johnson who introduced us, but that the Lord did so. What might He have said? I think He may have said, “This is My servant Ken and my servant Vera.” In fact, I think if any of us as believers were to have the Lord introduce us to someone, He would say, “This is my servant.” He said once to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job?” (Job 1:8).

The Lord certainly does that with Isaiah (v. 3). To the Lord, the man Isaiah is “My servant Isaiah.” Should not we see ourselves as God sees us? Of course, to be God’s servant is to do God’s work, and to do God’s work is to be entrusted with a very sacred and eternally consequential calling. Isaiah fulfills his calling as the Lord’s servant in two ways.

1. Isaiah carried God’s Word to those who would listen (v. 2). The phrase *by Isaiah* (ESV and KJV) is literally *by the hand of Isaiah*. In Genesis 38:20, Judah sends a kid to a town “by the hand of his friend.” Here, God sends His Word to people by the hand of Isaiah. God could have sent His Word by the angels, His heavenly messengers, but instead He sends it by His earth-bound servants like Isaiah and you and me.

God’s Word is never an easy word to speak, because it is never an easy word to hear. Isaiah’s message was “Egypt is not the

answer” in a day in which it seemed to everyone that Egypt was the only answer. Today, the Word we must carry to those who need to hear says, “Jesus is the only answer” in a world where it seems to everyone that they have the right to be their own answer. But in spite of this challenge, God has still chosen to deliver His Word by the hands of His servants. We must deliver God’s message to those who will hear.

2. Isaiah lived God’s command before those who would see (vv. 2-3). God’s command to Isaiah for three years was both different and similar to God’s command to us today. The difference, of course, is that we do not need to deliver our message while naked and barefoot. That could not have been an easy command to obey, but obeying it was an indispensable part of Isaiah’s ministry as God’s servant. It helped others to listen.

The similarity between God’s command to Isaiah and to us is the first word – “Go.” We are told to go, make disciples, baptize them, and teach them the commands of Christ so that they may do the same for others. We are told to love one another as Christ has loved us, so that all men might know that we are His disciples. These are some ways we must go. Unless we go with our feet, what we say with our lips will not be heard. Without a life of obedience before those who see, they will have no help to listen to us, and we will fail as the servants of the Lord.

So, people find the answer to the question, “How shall we escape?” when God sends His Word to them by the hand of a faithful and obedient servant. Are those whom we know, who are asking themselves, “How shall I escape?” hearing God’s answer in Christ from us? Are they seeing from us a life that backs up what we tell them? They must hear from and listen to God’s servant to escape.

II. Reject false answers to escape (vv. 4-6).

Illustration: The coffee shop burglar undoubtedly had an escape planned out for his break-in at the coffee shop. I still do

not fully understand why he was on the roof, and I have no idea what his plan for escape was. What I do know is that his plan failed. Whatever answer he had to “How shall I escape?” was a false answer, and he did not escape.

Application: Egypt was the false answer of many who desired to escape Assyria in Isaiah’s day, and Isaiah uses two phrases that tell us some reasons why many create and prefer their own false answers to this question, rather than asking the Lord.

1. The first is the phrase *both young and old* (v. 4). When we are young, we are tempted to think that we will escape because we are young, because we still have our whole life ahead of us. We think we have time to do business with God after we have all the other fun and experiences that we want to have. But this is a false answer. God’s Word is clear, “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’” (Eccl. 12:1).

Still others think that they will escape because they are old. They have lived their life a certain way, and in defense of that way they are not going to change who they are now. This is their escape plan, but it too is a false answer. God’s answer is far different: “That the aged men be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience. The aged women likewise, that they be in behavior as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things” (Tit. 2:2-3). God wants old people to change too.

2. The second phrase that tells why the false answers are so attractive is *Cush their hope . . . Egypt their beauty* (v. 5). Each of us is tempted to think we can escape by our own hope and our own beauty, or by the hope man provides and the beauty man possesses. Man often sees his hope and beauty in science and technology. This is a false answer too. As sinners we have no hope or beauty that can tell us how to escape. Ephesians 2:12, “That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the

commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world." No hopeful outlook that is without Christ can provide an escape. Hope without Christ is false hope. Beauty without Christ is false beauty. To escape, we must reject these false answers, and the many others that are similar.

III. Trust the right answer to escape (2 Kings 18-19).

Illustration: After the Fall of France in WW2 and the Dunkirk rescue, the new British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, gave the third of three speeches to rally his country to their national defense during a time he believed would be remembered as "their finest hour." Here is some of what he said:

"I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war.

"If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'"

Application: In the days of Isaiah, there was one successful escape from Assyria. As we look back on the history of Israel, we see that this was indeed one of their finest hours. Isaiah tells us this history later in his book, but we will look to 2 Kings 18-19 and read about it there. Hezekiah, the king of Isaiah's Judah, provided his people with the right answer to the question,

“How shall we escape?” As we read how he did so, we can glean some truths that will help us experience a fine hour of escape from our enemy.

(1) We will escape when we trust the man who tells us to trust the Lord (18:22, 29-31, 36). Hezekiah told God’s people, “Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us than with him: With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles. And the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah king of Judah” (2 Chron. 32:7-8). We need to rest on the words of a brother who talks like that. Then we will escape.

(2) We will escape when we conquer fear (19:1, 6-7). Clearly, what Assyria had done to Egypt years before at the Battle of Eltekeh not only reinforced confidence in Isaiah’s prophecies, but also created a lot of fear in the hearts of an exposed Judah. As Paul encouraged Timothy, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7). Fear is the enemy’s tool against us, but we can escape through faith in the promises of God.

(3) We will escape through prayer (19:14-19). When Paul sought to teach believers how to put on the armor of God, he wrote, “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints” (Eph. 6:18). Spurgeon said, “Prayer plumes the wings of God’s young eaglets so that they may learn to mount above the clouds. Prayer brings inner strength to God’s warriors and sends them forth to spiritual battle with their muscles firm and their armor in place.” If we pray, we will escape.

(4) We escape when we remember that the Lord is sovereign and in control (19:20-37). And so Hezekiah escapes, because his escape was part of the Lord’s gracious and merciful plan of one who makes all things work together for our good.

Conclusion: Today, many are looking for the answer to the question, "How shall I escape?" How can I escape my sin, my despair, my sickness, my addictions, my hopelessness, my mortality? The enemy tells them they cannot escape, or he deceives them with false answers to their question. Their flesh tells them to try to escape in all the wrong ways.

Jesus told us that He is the way to escape (Matthew 11 – "Come unto Me all ye who labor and are heavy laden. . . . I will give you rest"). May the Lord give us our finest hour as we escape in victory over our enemy. Trust those who tell you to trust the Lord. Do not be afraid. Keep praying. Know that the Lord is in control and that He will not fail those for whom He died. The future is very bright for escapees who trust in Him. It is a future of "broad, sunlit uplands" of eternity.

"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