



THE REBIRTH OF A NATION: A CONSUMING FIRE

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Isaiah 6:9-13

Second Message

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SERIES: A NEW SERVANT, A NEW COVENANT, A NEW AGE

I never thought I would find myself being thankful for owning a television set, but last week I finally discovered a program worth watching. I am referring to the dramatic television documentary of our American Civil War. The film editor did a marvelous job of scanning with the camera thousands of original photographs of battle scenes, while at the same time different voices read personal accounts from the letters and diaries of the participants. Thus we could see with the *eye* and hear with the *ear* the tragic and heroic stories from both perspectives, North and South.

I found my heart moved by this presentation of the fiery rampage that devastated our nation. By means of photographs, voice and sound, we “saw” General Pickett’s suicidal charge through open cornfields in his attempt to take Cemetery Ridge. Three thousand men died there in just a few minutes of action. And at Gettysburg, 58,000 men, more than a quarter of the number of our troops now stationed in the Persian Gulf, died in battle. Sherman’s march from Atlanta to the sea was presented. His army cut a swath of destruction, sometimes as wide as 60 miles, through the Georgia landscape. By the end of the war the death toll had reached 630,000. The land lay ravaged and desolate.

To what purpose? we might ask. Our Declaration of Independence, written almost 100 years before the Civil War, holds that we are one nation, under God, and that we believe all men are created equal, with certain inalienable rights. Yet it took the consuming fire of a civil war to put those ideals into law and practice. By the end of the carnage we were truly one nation and all were free. One of the concluding scenes showed the reunion at Gettysburg, 50 years after the end of the war. On July 1, 1913, veterans from both sides came together at Cemetery Ridge and clasped hands over a stone wall in a demonstration of unity. What a price had been paid to accomplish the rebirth of our nation!

As high as that cost was, however, it seems small when compared to the cost of the rebirth of another land, the nation of Israel. This is the theme we will look at this morning from the book of Isaiah—the cost of God’s fiery judgment in the rebirth of Israel.

Last week we looked at the birth of Isaiah as a prophet (6:1-8). In the year of the death of King Uzziah (740 BC) (the king a leper for presuming on God’s holiness), Isaiah had a vision of God in his temple. Uzziah had become strong, and had extended the boundaries of the nation. But he arrogantly entered into the Holy Place, bypassing the priesthood, and took the holy fire unto himself. In that year, Isaiah had the privilege of being transported to that high and holy mountain, the temple of God. There he saw past the Holy Place into the real Holy of Holies where God is seated on his throne. Isaiah was consumed with the holiness and the sovereignty of God. As he viewed this awesome scene he despaired of his own depravity, but God in grace touched his lips with a burning coal. The holy fire cleansed him, and in gratitude Isaiah responded by making himself available to God as his prophet.

Today therefore we will look at the commissioning of God’s prophet, the man who will speak God’s word to Israel. Israel was born as a nation at Mt. Sinai around 1400 BC. She was born with the highest of ideals. The Scripture depicts God as the husband in this relationship and Israel as his bride. God declares his love for Israel, an affection that was demonstrated in his rescuing the Jews from bondage in Egypt. By his grace he had made them a free people. In return, God asked Israel to love him with her whole heart and strength, and to love her neighbor as herself. Therein lay the whole law of God. This covenant between God and his holy people was sealed at Mt. Sinai.

But 700 years later, at the time this prophecy was written, except for a few bright moments, Israel’s history was an appalling account of idolatry, immorality, and social oppression. Some of the prophets even referred to the nation as a prostitute. What word shall the prophet speak to a people

like this? Despite Israel’s unfaithfulness to the covenant, it is God’s desire to restore both the nation and the covenant. But the disease of sin had so poisoned the relationship that God cannot restore the marriage in the same way as formerly. Instead, he first had to unleash his holy fire of destruction; only then could he create something new and transcendent. The nation would be reborn, but this time through fire. As we look at this passage illustrating the rebirth of Israel we can see that at times this same procedure must be followed in the rebirth in Christ of the calloused of heart.

I. The nation is hardened (6:9-10)

And He said, “Go, and tell this people:
‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive;
Keep on looking, but do not understand.
Render the hearts of this people insensitive,
Their ears dull,
And their eyes dim,
Lest they see with their eyes,
Hear with their ears,
Understand with their hearts,
And repent and be healed.’”

A. The reason for hardening: No longer “My people”

The first aspect of God’s judgment as it is revealed in this text is apparent in the way the Lord refers to Israel. There is a significant change here. No longer does he call them “My people,” he refers to them instead as “this people.” Israel has played the prostitute so long that God no longer refers to them as his people. God, the wronged party in this marriage, must be the one who publicly announces that a divorce has occurred, even as Israel hypocritically acts as if everything is well in the marriage. But God calls a spade a spade, and refuses to cover up the problem.

I counseled a married woman once who was living with an abusive, alcoholic husband who had many adulterous affairs. He kept returning to his wife, wanting to keep up the appearance of a marriage while continuing in sin. She knew that the Bible says that God hates divorce, but I pointed out to her that God publicly said his people had divorced him, and this was what she too had to do with her husband to make him face up to the consequences of his actions. He had already divorced her, and she as the wronged party needed to make that public in order to demonstrate that her husband’s heart had been hardened for a long time. The wronged party often suffers blame for this proper action, yet it is the right thing to do.

Yes, God hates divorce, but here he makes the pronouncement that his people have forsaken him, and thus exposes what had been going on for 700 years.

Next, God gives the nation over to a paradoxical judgment.

B. The manifestation of hardening: Paradoxical behavior (6:9-10a)

And He said, “Go, and tell this people:
‘Keep on listening, but do not perceive;
Keep on looking, but do not understand.
Render the hearts of this people insensitive,
Their ears dull,
And their eyes dim...’”

The first manifestation of judgment occurs silently. A casual observer could not tell that anything had gone wrong. But the people of Israel would exhibit paradoxical behavior. There would be an intensity of learning on their part, but they would have no spiritual perception. Our eyes and ears enable us to learn spiritual truth. Our eyes see the salvation acts, and our ears hear the prophetic word, enabling the heart to become spiritually perceptive and thus see the glory of the God who is behind the acts of salvation and the prophetic word. Here God says to Israel that he will continue with

his acts of salvation, and continue sending the prophetic word. And God was faithful to his word. Following this word he sent the greatest prophets in history—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel—all of whom faithfully gave forth the prophetic word. Even after the gift of prophecy ended, 400 years before the birth of Christ, some of the most gifted writing in the history of Israel was accomplished.

One of the great acts of salvation in the history of the nation occurred when Hezekiah prayed to the God of Abraham on the occasion when Sennacherib's armies surrounded Jerusalem. In one night the angel of the Lord killed 180,000 Syrians, the mightiest army on the face of the earth. An outside observer would conclude that God was not judging, but saving Israel. Judgment, however, is not manifested from the outside, but from within. This is where sin first takes root—within.

The reason behind this paradoxical behavior, this intensity of learning but no perception, is that the faculties necessary to discernment, the eye and the ear, had become dysfunctional. This is God's method of judgment—he shuts the eye so that we cannot see the significance of his acts of salvation, and he shuts the ear so that we cannot hear the prophetic word that is still going forth. The heart becomes dull and heavy.

This past summer I played golf with my 82-year-old father and discovered that he has become hard of hearing, but he is too proud to admit it, and refuses to wear a hearing aid. To all outward appearances it seemed we were having a great conversation as we drove around the golf course, but there were two different conversations going on, and they never seemed to cross paths. This is similar to what happened to Israel when God began judging the nation. Their eyes became dim to acts of salvation, and their ears became dull to the prophetic word.

After this, their hearts became “insensitive”; they became dull and complacent. The fat heart “speaks of a slow, languid, self-oriented set of responses, incapable of decisive, self-sacrificial action” (John Oswalt). Why do you think Jesus healed a blind man and opened the ears of a deaf mute? Those were not arbitrary miracles. The men in question were healed as a visual aid to Israel to help them see that they had become blind, deaf, and dull of heart. Jesus came to cause the rebirth of the nation so that could see, hear, and love God. This is why he performed his miracles.

The reason for this judgment is given in verse 10:

C. To prevent premature healing (6:10b)

“Lest they see with their eyes,
Hear with their ears,
Understand with their hearts,
And turn and be healed.”

It seems rather cruel that God would harden the hearts of his people to prevent their healing, but we must ask what kind of healing God had in mind. Israel had for 700 years been a stiff-necked, idolatrous people. It would not be enough for the nation to suddenly wake up to her sinful condition and ask to restate her marriage vows. What would be the point in going back to Mt. Sinai and saying to God, “You have saved us. We love you, and from now on we will serve you”? This was what they had said in the book of Joshua—“We can do it. We love you.” But their disease had so infected them that anything but a deep and penetrating judgment would not suffice.

People with addictive habits who are never faced with the consequences of their actions often make resolutions to change, feeling that they can effect change in their habits. But their feelings are not in accord with the reality of the consequences of their sin. Adulterers at times want to renew their commitment to marriage, to turn over a new leaf, without being made to face the consequences of their actions. If they are allowed to do this, soon their resolve breaks down and they return to their ways. They are healed in intention but not in reality.

My wife's sister seemed to become addicted to many wrongful things after her parents went through a divorce. She attempted suicide several times; she spent her inheritance on cocaine. From the time she was 11 until the time of her death at 31, someone always bailed her out and she didn't have to face the consequences of her actions. She kept promising herself and others that she would change, but it was not until she became infected with AIDS that she turned around and underwent real healing when she gave her life over to Christ shortly before her death.

This is the first step in the rebirth process—a blatant announcement by God of the naked truth. An inoperable cancer was affecting this nation of Israel, and it had been present since its inception. The only solution was to

let the disease run its full course. There is something much more important than healing. This first stage of God's wrath is a painful thing!

There are people sitting here who have hardened their hearts to truth although they sit here week after week listening to God's word. Continued exposure to the light only makes them harder. If you go out in the early dawn and fail to adjust your eyes to the early light, and shut them instead, you dare not open them later in the full light of the sun lest you be blinded. So you keep them shut, and the increasing light serves merely to harden you against the brightness.

Now we come to the second stage of God's judgment.

II. The nation is disassembled! (6:11)

Then I said, “Lord, how long?”

And He answered,

“Until cities are devastated and without inhabitant,
Houses are without people,
And the land is utterly desolate.”

Isaiah's response, “How long? O Lord!” demonstrates his grief and horror, his longing for the mercy of God. The Lord's reply, basically, is, “Until I dismantle the whole nation.” But this hardness will allow God to enact the curses of the covenant, and give the people the full consequences of the divorce.

A. The seed is destroyed

God's promise to Abraham was twofold: Abraham would have a seed that would be a blessing to all nations, and secondly, that seed would have a land, and through that land God would mediate his life spiritually to the people. That is what makes a nation: a seed and a land coming together. But here is what God declared would be the result if they broke the covenant and disobeyed him,

“But it shall come about, if you will not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country. Cursed shall be fruit of your body and the produce of your ground, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock.” (Deut 28:15-16, 18)

B. The land is desolate

Thus, here in verse 11 God is declaring that he is now going to put in motion the curse of Deuteronomy 28. The covenant had been broken, so God was going to destroy the seed and devastate the land. The word for desolation conveys the thought that the destruction is so appalling that anyone observing it is rendered speechless.

The instruments God used to accomplish this were two pagan peoples, the Assyrians and Babylonians. The Assyrians were the most wicked people on the face of the earth. Before this time, most battles were merely border skirmishes, fought by local inhabitants who left their pastures or farms for awhile to engage in battle with their neighbors. But the Assyrians had dreams of taking over the whole world. To help accomplish this, they came up with the idea of using mercenaries. They took the best men of a conquered people and deported them to other lands to fight on their behalf. By means of this mixing of populations the Assyrians ensured that loyalties and populations were divided. (The Romanian dictator, Ceaucescu, used the same strategy. He adopted orphans from several countries and trained them as young men for his dreaded Securitate, the secret police. These men remained loyal to him to the end because they had no other loyalties.)

The Assyrians were the ones who first came up with these ideas to conquer the world. When King Hezekiah discerned that the Assyrians would attack Israel, however, instead of taking Isaiah's words to heart, he raised the defense budget and sought to fortify the country. He even imported chariots from Egypt, in defiance of Deuteronomy 17, for the great chariot city of Lachish. But all to no avail. Hezekiah failed to heed Isaiah's warning. The Annals of Sennacherib, the commander of the Assyrians, tells the terrible story:

As for Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke. I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered (them) by means of we-stamper (earth-ramps), and battering-rams brought (thus) near (the walls) combined with the attack by foot soldiers, (using) mines, breeches as well as sapper work. I drove out (of them) 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, big and small beyond counting, and con-

sidered (them) booty. Himself (Hezekiah) I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with earthwork in order to make it impossible to go out from the city gate.

The surrender of Lachish became the subject of a palace relief in Assyria. That relief still exists today, and it is on view in the British Museum in London where it occupies an entire room. Can there be any doubt that God was serious in his intentions? He has immortalized his judgment, and the visible signs of that may be seen yet today, 2,700 years after the surrender of Lachish.

So the first step in God's judgment was to harden the hearts of the nation of Israel; secondly, he allowed both the seed and the land to be dismantled. Now we come to the third aspect.

III. The nation is abandoned! (6:12)

The Lord has removed men far away,
And the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

A. The seed is uprooted

Again, God is carrying out the curse of Deuteronomy 28, where he said, "The Lord will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you shall not understand, a nation of fierce countenance who shall have no respect for the old, nor show favor to the young... And it shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls in which you trusted come down throughout your land, and it shall besiege you in all your towns throughout your land which the Lord your God has given you... Then you shall be left few in number, whereas you were as the stars of heaven for multitude, because you did not obey the Lord your God." (Deut 28:49-50, 52, 62)

B. The land is abandoned

Israel will have to suffer abandonment and loneliness for 70 years. Sometimes we need to feel abandoned and lonely before we are ready to hear the word of God concerning grace. Why did God take the Jews back to Babylon when he dismantled the nation? He could have taken them to Egypt, to the Hittite kingdom or elsewhere. It is because God first called Abram in Ur of the Chaldees—in Babylon! What God is saying in this decision to exile the nation to Babylon is, "Go back where you came from. After 1,400 years under the covenant which we established you still have made no spiritual progress. That is why I am reversing your history and sending you back where you came from." God must sometimes do this with us, too.

To feel the weight of this abandonment, put yourself in the place of an exiled Jew in Babylon as you hear the following account.

Remembering Babylon: An Exile's Perspective

I remember the hunger and thirst, the despair and the pain. I can still see the blood and hear the screaming as the soldiers struck with their swords. Zedekiah, that arrogant fool—who was he to think that rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar would be successful. And then they set fire to Jerusalem, its walls torn to the ground. And then I watched as the Temple of Solomon was destroyed, burned to nothing. The glory of the house of the Lord was no more. My heart died, knowing that, as surely as the Babylonians had conquered Judah, so the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had died.

Thirty years I have lived in Mesopotamia. Much has happened since then. But I still remember the day Nebuchadnezzar's army came to destroy Jerusalem.

I was a young man when Nebuchadnezzar came, the son of a leading citizen. Many of us, my friends and their families, were imprisoned, taken before the Babylonian king at Riblah. I watched as many of my friends were killed there, executed. I, though, was spared. I thought for a moment that I might be allowed to return to Jerusalem, but no. Soon I was taken, captive, to the land of the Babylonians.

I do not remember how long we walked. But I remembered the day we reached Babylon. We were on a large plain, marching south. The first thing I saw looked like a painted mountain, gleaming in the sky above a great city. As we drew near, I saw that it was not a mountain, but a building. It looked like seven boxes, each smaller than the last. They were stacked upon one another; like seven-steps reaching towards heaven—I now know that the Babylonians called it a ziggurat.

As we approached, we encountered a fortified wall. It was there to protect the city, but it was not the great walls that loomed ahead. Just inside this first wall was the Summer Palace, set along the Euphrates River. I learned later

that the Euphrates ran through the entire city. As we marched further south, there was another palace, decorated with lions formed from enameled brick. Across from it was what appeared to be a soldiers' camp.

We entered the city by crossing a ramp that spanned a moat filled with water, and marching through the Ishtar Gate. This gate allowed passage through the two main walls which protected Babylon from intruders. Both were made from brick, and I knew that no intruder could penetrate their thickness. The outer wall was 11 feet thick, and was surrounded by a moat filled with water. The inner wall was even more imposing than the first, being some 21 feet thick. Every 65 feet along its span, there was a tower rising 30 to 60 feet high; around the city there must have been nearly 100 towers. This wall was wide enough for four chariots to ride its length abreast, being over 20 feet wide.

From the outside, the gate itself appeared to have an arched entry some 15 feet wide and 30 feet high. On each side were great brick towers faced with blue tiles. The towers were decorated with bulls and dragons. I knew these were symbols of the Babylonian gods: My spirit sank as I recalled the Lord's Temple burning, and the Babylonian soldiers' hurtful chant, "Yahweh is dead, Yahweh is dead". These animals were brilliantly colored, and set in relief. Entering between the towers I found myself in a gate room. On one side was a large dais on which sat a statue of a Babylonian god. My head hung with even greater despair.

Once through the first gate room—and thus the outer wall—I saw a larger pair of towers perched before and above the great inner wall. Like the first towers, these were blue. They, however, did not have any animals.

Between these towers one entered a 100-foot long gate room. And then I was in the City proper. I was stunned by the grandeur of Babylon. I had known the glory of Solomon's temple, but nothing prepared me for what I saw before me.

I was now on the "Sacred Way", a special processional path which connected the Ishtar Gate with the major temples. It was paved with asphalt-covered bricks. I looked at my feet: On the bricks I read the words "Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, paved this road with mountain stone for the procession of Marduk, my lord. May Marduk my lord grant me eternal life". "May the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob destroy these stones, this nation and this detestable dragon", I thought contemptuously. Then I remembered the flames over the Holy of Holies, and despair descended once again. At the top of the road were flat pieces of rock cut from limestone. On either side of this road were walls made from brightly colored tiles. On them were perched 120 enameled lions. I heard much later that the Babylonians had built this special road so that their gods might walk between their temples without muddying their feet.

We were marched down this road. Immediately to my left was the temple for the goddess Ninmakh. This is a city filled with temples, fifty or more. On the right was Nebuchadnezzar's palace. Wherever I looked color blazed: blue, white, yellow. The palace had three major units, each surrounding a square court. The one nearest the street contained the official reception rooms for the king. It was made of yellow brick. Some of its floors were white, while others were made from beautifully-patterned sandstone. Giant stone lions guarded the entrance.

Next to the palace, and a part of its compound, were the gardens that Nebuchadnezzar had built for his queen. It was built as a series of circular colonnades, one built on top of another. Many have rumored that the king had built the gardens because the queen had longed for the hillsides of her home. The topmost terrace was covered with rich soil, many feet deep. Deep-rooted trees, bushes and plants of many kinds were planted here. The queen and her maids were housed 75 feet higher than the surrounding city, and could walk unveiled, shielded by their perch from the view of the common people.

As we walked down the street, we saw one-story, flat-roofed houses made of brick. These were the private residences. Though there were no windows in the walls facing the street, I looked through some doorways into them. Their facades were faced with enameled tiles in brilliant blue, yellow or white. Many were decorated with figures of animals. We stopped once, and I looked closely at the bricks. On most of them I read the words "I am Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon."

We reached the ziggurat. It was on the right side of the "processional way," 600 yards from the main palace. It stood in the middle of a large courtyard and rose some 280 feet. Surrounding it were buildings which were used as storehouses. At its top was a massive table of solid gold, and an ornate bed. I

have been told that each night a woman slept in the bed, a prostitute waiting the pleasure of their abominable idols. From the roof, one could look out over the vast city of Babylon, stretching beyond the walls.

Next to the ziggurat complex was a gigantic temple dedicated to Marduk, the god of Babylon. The main gate to this temple was in the eastern wall. Inside was an inner court. At the other end of this inner court was the main temple. The roof was covered with gold and silver, the walls with gold. Along one wall was the large golden image of Marduk.

It was here that my heart shattered. I wept bitter tears born of confusion and despair: God had forsaken His people...no, they said that He had been destroyed by Marduk this golden beast...but the prophets had warned us that though God would remain alive, we would be cut off...I had no answer; all I knew was that the sweetness of life, all the promises and blessings of the living God, everything had been taken away, and I stood before the image of a foreign idol in a foreign land. I sought solace from God, but there was none...and there I stood, without hope.

Eventually, we Jews were settled together in southern Mesopotamia, south of Babylon. To my surprise, we were not mixed with the people of the land, but were kept in our own community. Although I never have felt free, my life is not as bad as I had imagined it would be when I left Judah. Life has been nothing like the stories I remember about my nation's time in Egypt. I have built a house, and for many years have tended my fields. The sale of my crops have given me more than enough to have a comfortable life.

We Jews still have our elders, priests and prophets: The Babylonians did not stop us from maintaining our old institutions. We corresponded with friends who did remain in the land. Some of our number have been favored with employment by the king. This is especially true of those captives skilled as craftsmen and artisans. Others have established prosperous businesses.

Thirty years have passed since that first day, and I still taste often the bitterness of those tears. I yearn for my homeland. And I have remembered the words of the prophets. They spoke of impending doom; we were foolish to ignore them. But the same Word of the Lord also foretold a coming day of salvation, a day of comfort, a day when Messiah would save his people from this punishment, just as Moses led Israel from Egypt.

My eyes have dimmed, but my heart still yearns: Would that God—Who has not died, but is alive—would that He fulfill His promises soon. Hear my cry, O Lord! ¹

Here is how the prophet Jeremiah described the captivity:

**“The Lord has accomplished His wrath,
He has poured out His fierce anger;
And He has kindled a fire in Zion
Which has consumed its foundations.” (Lam 4:11)**

God's wrath hardened his people, and it dismantled and abandoned the nation.

There is hope, however, as the concluding verses reveal.

IV. A remnant returns: A hope for rebirth (6:13a)

“Yet there will be a tenth portion in it,”

A. The definition of the remnant

A remnant will return. There is still hope for the rebirth of the nation. Bruce Waltke comments, “Remnant is that portion of Abraham's seed that God preserved through the vicissitudes of history, from whom Jesus Christ came, and so the medium from whom the kingdom of God comes.”

B. Three implications of the remnant

There are three theological implications to the fact that this remnant remains. First, only a remnant will survive: judgment is severe. God enacts the curses of Deuteronomy, exactly to the letter, upon his people. But, second, the remnant is supernaturally preserved by grace: mercy is unmerited. God cuts short his wrath because of his loyal love. When the Civil War ended and the survivors returned to their homes, they were greeted with great joy and thankfulness because they had survived the holocaust. Anyone surviving this judgment by God in 500 BC would have the same response—amazement and thankfulness for the mercy of God. Although they did not deserve any better treatment than the multitudes of dead, by God's grace they had become part of the surviving remnant. The remnant in Babylon survived be-

cause God had made an oath to Abraham. His loyal love was greater than his wrath. Thirdly, the existence of a remnant demonstrates that there is a promise of a future: there is more to come. God has a future for his people. Isaiah will develop this theme later in the book.

God is a consuming fire, but his grace is deeper still. Let every man be faithless, but he remains faithful because he cannot deny himself.

Finally, even the remnant is burned.

V. The remnant is burned: The Holy Seed is born (6:13b)

“And it will again be subject to burning,

Like a terebinth or an oak

Whose stump remains when it is felled.

The holy seed is its stump.”

At the conclusion of the Civil War documentary, a black woman historian commented that while the war may have legally ended slavery and given black people freedom in law, it did not remove prejudice from the heart. I thought about my own boyhood, knowing people who were bitter and prejudiced. I remembered the assassination of Martin Luther King, the Watts riots, and the Civil Rights movement in the '60's. The Civil War did accomplish the rebirth of our nation, but love had not yet been born in the hearts of the people.

Here, Isaiah pictures the remnant like a lone oak tree in a field, but then another fire rages, devastating the field and the tree. The tree is cut down and only the stump remains. But the fire has caused the stump to be holy, and out of it grows a little green shoot.

There are certain species of pine cones that will not release their seeds unless they are exposed to tremendous heat. The great fire at Yellowstone National Park which devastated one-third of that park caused this to happen. Thousands upon thousands of pine cone seeds burst forth and took root because they had been exposed to the fire and heat. This is the vision Isaiah has as he picks up this thought in chapter 11:

Then a shoot will spring from the stem (stump) of Jesse,

And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.

And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him. (Isa 11:1-2a)

In later chapters, Isaiah gives this One the title “Israel.” “You are my Servant Israel,” says the prophet. And this Servant hears. He is so spiritually perceptive he will not judge by what the eye sees or by what the ear hears. This Servant who comes forth from the stump sees what is in the heart: “And He will not judge by what His eyes see, nor make a decision by what His ears hear.” I asked myself what fire did that stump go through that made it so holy, and then explode to bring forth countless holy seeds. At first I thought it might have been the great fire in AD 70, when Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed by fire. During that battle 1.2 million Jews lost their lives. But then I remembered that there was another tree that was consumed by a holy fire. I am referring to the cross of Christ. On that tree, the green shoot that sprang forth from the stump took upon Himself the full weight of God's holy wrath. That is what gave birth to the holy seed. Peter wrote that if now we have believed in Christ, we have purified our souls, for we have been born again, not of a seed which is perishable, but imperishable (1 Pet 1:22-23). Unlike the old covenant, which said, “if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples...and you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:5), the new covenant declares, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession” (1 Pet 2:9).

The Civil War cost 630,000 lives to take an ideal and make it law. But that did not change the heart of the nation. At the cross, however, in contrast, through the death of one Divine Son who was fully consumed by God's holy wrath, a holy seed, a new covenant, transcendently new and different, was born to all who will but believe.

I have but one exhortation: that we appreciate God for what he has done in Christ.

1. Special thanks to Jeff Wong for research.