



The words of Isaiah 65 come to us from the depths of the Babylonian captivity. After the death of King Solomon, the nation of Israel split into two: the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern Kingdom of Judah. The northern Israel is eventually sieged and dissolved by King Sennacherib of the Assyrian Empire; these 11 tribes of Israel are lost to history, gone. The Prophets of the north, Amos and Hosea, preached and warned of this doom. But the rebellious and depraved Kingdom of Israel did not turn from their evil ways and thus suffered God's judgement.

The southern Judah is also sieged by the Assyrians, but by the hand of God and the faithfulness of the "good king" Hezekiah, the Assyrian onslaught is defeated. For a time, Judah repents and turns back to God, away from their evil ways; and they enjoy the blessings that are sure to come with a life of faithfulness to God. But ultimately that faithfulness dries up and God raises up yet another empire to punish his people: Babylon. This empire will not be like the rest. Babylon will have God's blessing to march, to conquer and to enslave with impunity.

This is the context of Isaiah 65. God's people of Judah live in a foreign land among foreign people, who do foreign things, who worship foreign false gods. Isaiah and preached against the adoption of these foreign cultures. He encouraged them to worship their God, the one true living God. He reminded them of the wonderful and mighty deeds he performed in the sight of their forefathers. The epic events of the Exodus. But Isaiah also preached the future – the coming salvation for God's people. From Isaiah 52:

How beautiful are the feet of him who brings good news... All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. But all this falls upon deaf ears. Now God resigns to go elsewhere for a people. The first verse of our text:

*I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me;  
I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me.  
I said, "Here I am, here I am,"  
to a nation that was not called by my name.*

Isaiah prophesies what will come-to-pass under the ministry of the Apostle Paul. The Gentiles (the non-Jews) will receive the gospel on the account of the Jewish rejection. Gentiles will be grafted into the tree of life, says the Apostle. This is the fullness of time from Galatians 3 this morning. In Christ, through faith, There is neither Jew nor Greek... For salvation is not through Abahamic bloodline, but through the blood of the Lamb. God will not be denied the glory of redeeming a people for himself. Even if his chosen nation (Israel) rejects him; even if they refuse to repent from their evil ways; God will find another people to redeem. That is who God is; he is the Redeemer.

But Israel did indeed follow their own ways; and their own ways were indeed very evil. They follow their own devices, verse 2. So they follow their own faculties, their own thoughts. They refuse to let God decide what is best for them. They trust him no more. It is their will that they follow.

A people who provoke me to my face continually, verse 3. Their disobedience is open and free. They have no shame. They have no fear. They are God's people, are they not. What have they to fear? Ancient Israel practiced a polytheistic liturgy – a spiritual hedging of bets, you could say. They might worship and sacrifice to Yahweh in the morning; but then turn around in the afternoon and worship Baal in the evening. And they did this, where? In the very temple of God! So they very much were a people who provoked God, to his face.

They who sit in the tombs and spend the night in the secret places, verse 4. These would be sacrifices to the dead, held in the graves themselves. Modern times might call these practices seances. Accompanying these dark practices would be other unspeakable acts. So unspeakable, I am hesitant to mention in the presence of our children. Israel had become disgusting. Depraved. Demonic.

They who eat pig's flesh and broth of tainted meat, verse 4 again. Swine was not regarded as either edible nor fit for sacrifice. A theory behind this is that often times these foreign religions would demand child sacrifice. But to avoid the sacrifice of their child, the emotionally-conflicted-pagan-mother would instead offer a piglet, thus apparently fooling the pagan deity. Just an interesting theory (not proven by scripture); however, it does lend itself to the truth in-so-far-as God protected his people by commanding them to have nothing to do with a culture who practiced such heinous evil.

Isaiah had preached a warning of the looming captivity – the Babylonian Captivity. However, we can clearly see that even long before the Babylonian conquest, Israel was already in a worse captivity – a captivity of sin. Captivity may not seem like something that affects us these days. Things like the Constitution, a reliable paycheck and air conditioning make for a relatively free and libertarian way of life. However, the lesson from the prophet Isaiah is this: sin is always seeking to take us captive.

And if the sinner refuses to acknowledge that very clear and present danger, then the devil may already be well on his way to capture. It is said that the devil's greatest achievement is to convince people that he doesn't exist. It is likewise, in our present context, the devil achieves his goal when he convinces us that we are beyond capture. Our modern way of life and exhaustive knowledge of the world would seem to inoculate us from devilish schemes. How foolish we would be.

Ironically enough, a lesson in sin's captivity comes from our gospel text: Jesus heals the man who was possessed by demons. What was the reaction from the townspeople? What did they say to Jesus once they saw the previously demon-captured man, now in his right mind, sitting at Jesus' feet? Mark's account seems to put it more pointedly:

*And the crowd began pleading with Jesus to go away and leave them alone.*

Who was captive? Who was in denial? Who was the addict? Why did the crowd want Jesus gone? Theories abound: Jesus broke the ordinary; Jesus demonstrated greater power than ever known before; at least they knew the demon, but power over the demons is unknown, and the unknown is terrifying. Perhaps each has its own elements of plausibility. But the simplest reason rings with the truth; the townspeople were upset at the loss of all their delicious bacon. The healing of the demon possessed man means nothing to these people; they only feel the loss of their livestock. Should there be any more demon possession in the region, the crowd won't wait to find out how much more livestock will pay the price for spiritual liberation; this stranger needs to leave.

And Jesus obliges. Jesus will not press his gospel any further than he already has. Rejection of the gospel never looked so petty and superficial. But the healed man, what of him? The town begs for Jesus to leave; but the healed man begs Jesus that he might leave with him. And what does Jesus say to him? Go home. And tell people how much God has done for you. In other words, go tell how you were once in captivity, but now are free. In other words, go share the gospel.

What can the church learn from the man who was healed? The gospel is a powerful motivator. Go and share the power of God. Go and tell the world what God has done for you. The gospel made that man into a great gospel preacher. What can the church learn from the town-folk of the Gerasenes? There are all kinds of captivity. Their captivity was one of complacency. Jesus disturbed the status quo. Jesus brought the new life of the gospel; but all the townspeople wanted was their pigs. To hell with that guy who was freed from demons; ironic, to say the least. And finally, what can the church learn from the years leading up to the Babylonian captivity? The devil's hold on the man in the Gerasenes was stark and abundantly clear; however, the devil's hold on ancient Israel was less so. Foreign and false gods had snaked their way in and coiled up in their homes. The Israelite cannot worship both Yahweh and Baal; both Yahweh and Molech. Likewise, the Christian cannot worship both Christ and money; both Christ and your children; both Christ and the self.

The church has much to learn. So, thanks be to God, we have a good teacher, even the Holy Spirit. Are you beyond capture? No. However, the Holy Spirit is; and he has made his dwelling place, even his holy temple, within you. Within you, by virtue of holy baptism and ratified every time we commune on the body and blood of Christ, is the power of God. See how the demons cried out in fear when the Lord of life approached. See how the forces of darkness cower at the sight and sound of the Word of God. Even ancient Israel, as wicked as they were, had been totally relegated to the trash can of history. From rotted roots of Israel, God raised up his holy seed.

This is God's creation. Are their nefarious forces who seek to kill, steal and destroy? You better believe it. But God has joined himself with this creation by becoming flesh. His death and resurrection is victory – your victory over sin, death and the devil. And he has promised to protect you and shield you from any and every kind of assault of the devil, from any and every kind of captivity. Dwell in the shelter of the cross; devote to God's word; dine on the body and blood of the Lamb – and Satan and all his legions will have no power over you. We have been made free in Christ and therefore made also his fellow heirs of righteousness. We can be taken captive by no-one and no-thing, for we belong to Jesus Christ.

Amen