

Turn Back the Battle: Isaiah Speaks to Christians Today (Deror Books, Dec 2012) was launched by the Centre for the Study of Islam and Other Faiths (CSIOF) at Melbourne School of Theology (MST) on 30 April 2013.

The following is a transcript of Elizabeth Kendal's book launch address.

Considering how many books there are in the world today -- what is the point of this one?

Why would I bother writing it?

Why should you, or anyone else, bother reading it?

I wrote this book because I was concerned that while religious intolerance, hatred, repression and persecution were escalating across the world, many persecuted Christians and their advocates in the free world were making poor choices that were actually making their situation worse! I was concerned that at-risk-Christians were routinely being given advice that was haphazard, experimental and, dare I say, morally questionable, as if advisors were fishing for any means that might give them the desired end. Meanwhile nothing was getting any better -- everything has been getting worse. Today believers are suffering and dying in ever increasing numbers. As it says in Isaiah 26: though we have laboured, we have "*given birth to wind. We have accomplished no deliverance in the earth . . .*" (Isaiah 26:18-19).

I also wrote this book out of a deep conviction that God has *not* left us without instruction -- that the Bible does indeed provide not only theology but precedent to help us make right and faithful responses in testing times. I had especially come to appreciate how Isaiah answered the very question we are asking: who do we trust and in what do we place our hopes when our lives and liberties are on the line?

The book's title is taken from Isaiah 28:5-6 . . .

*In that day the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory
and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people,
and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment,
and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.*

. . . for isn't this the end we seek -- that the battle be turned back?

The image, meanwhile, denotes God's ordained means: the way of faith.



God is at work in this world today --
*against all that is proud and lofty,
against all that is lifted up - and it shall be brought low.*

*And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled,
and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low,*

*and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.
And the idols shall utterly pass away.*

In that day mankind will cast away their idols . . . (Excerpts: Isaiah 2:6-21 (ESV))

The Lord is shaking this world to bring down all that is false -- all that cannot save, so that he alone -- the world's ONLY Saviour will be exalted. This is mercy! This is grace!

But Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, paganism and atheistic secular humanism -- the pride of man will not go down without a fight. Though his fate has been sealed Satan is resisting his end "with the energy of despair" (J. Ellul)

Testing times are upon us -- we can expect things to get a lot worse yet.

As the enemies of God resist their end and fight the church, we need to know what God requires of us. God calls us to walk in his light (Isaiah 2:5), trusting God, not man (2:22). He calls us to stand firm in faith (7:9) and to walk and think and fear differently to the world (Is 8) -- that is, to walk by faith (not by sight), to think spiritually (not just materially and politically), to fear God alone (not all the things people fear). And if we will do this, then God promises that he will be to us a "sanctuary" (7:14a). And the Hebrew word used here is *miqdas*, which is not a place of refuge, although some modern translations have chosen to translate it that way. A *miqdas* is a holy place, a place where God dwells. Promise of Isaiah 8 is one of the most beautiful promises in scripture.

We need to understand that Christian security is *not* found in man / humanity -- so we should not put your hopes in any person; not ourselves and not others. Neither is Christian security found in cities or their vain, spiritually rebellious projects -- so we should not put out hopes in Washington, or Canberra, or Brussels or the EU or the UN or the World Bank or globalisation or democratisation . . . We should follow the example of Isaiah -- and in obedience speak truth *into* these -- while never actually putting out faith in them.

By the time the Assyrian Rabshaker and his great army arrived at the gates of Jerusalem, Assyria had already crushed Babylon (the great city -- Hezekiah's ally in the east) and levelled Tyre and Sidon (the great economic powers) so that Hezekiah's Western alliance unravelled and collective security failed. Most critically, the Assyrian "flood" (Isaiah 8 and 28) had swept away Judah's last hope -- military aid from Egypt (Judah's ally in the south), which it routed on the battlefield at Eltekeh. Everything Hezekiah had worked for, hoped in / trusted, had failed.

With nothing standing between the army of superpower Assyria the Judean remnant holed up in Jerusalem, it was a very confident Rabshaker who called out mockingly to King Hezekiah, "So who do you *now* trust?" (Isaiah 36:4-5)

Realising the situation was hopeless Hezekiah sent a delegation to Isaiah asking him to intercede for the remnant that was left.

A short time later Sennacherib sent Hezekiah a threatening letter, demanding unconditional surrender. To make sure Hezekiah realised exactly what was at stake, Sennacherib asked him: "*Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, the king of Hena, or the king of Ivvah?*" Hezekiah, of course, knew exactly where all these kings were -- they were his allies after all -- they were all dead! What's more, they'd probably been impaled or flayed alive, their heads stuck on pikes over cities gates.

Realising that his pride and independence had brought death and destruction to Judah and shame and ridicule to God name, Hezekiah repents. Donning sackcloth, he heads to the temple, where he lays the letter before the LORD and seeks his intervention, not because he believes he is worthy -- for he knows he is not; he is requesting grace. Hezekiah seeks God's intervention purely in the hope that honour and glory might be restored to God's name.

At that point – God's wait is over.

In Isaiah 30:18 we read:

"Therefore [as you are busy doing it your own way and in your own strength (30:15-17)] God waits to be gracious to you."

The word "wait" (Hebrew: *kah-kah*) is the typical word for "wait" as we understand it. It has two elements: to hold back / refrain from action in anticipation / faith of something else ----- as in I will **wait** for the bus: I will hold back / refrain from walking in anticipation / faith that the bus will come.

God waited as the Assyrian army crushed the Babylonian revolt (crushing Judah's hope in the east). God waited as Sennacherib's Army stormed into the Levant. God waited as the indomitable superpower razed Tyre and Sidon and as Hezekiah's Western Alliance unravelled. God waited as the Egyptian rescue party -- Judah's hope in the south -- was routed on the battlefield at Eltekeh. God waited as Sennacherib's forces flooded into Judah razing 46 fortified Judean cities in the process. God waited as Lachish was besieged . . .

But according to the verse (30:18) -- God had risen up and was ready for action -- *"For the LORD is a God of justice."*

So what is he waiting for ?????

The answer is in the verse: *"Blessed are all those who wait for him."* (Isaiah 30:18d)

God refrained from works / showing grace in anticipation that his people would (eventually) refrain from works in anticipation / faith that their faithful God would show grace.

God waits for us to wait for him!

Then comes the promise: *"For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more [i.e. the enemies of God will not be victorious]. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you."* (Isaiah 30:19)

Isaiah commentator John Oswalt says here: "God's answer to the cry "'How long Oh Lord?' is 'whenever you are ready'." How radical is that! (This has kept me awake at night!)

But this is exactly what happened in 701 BC.

In 701 BC, the Assyrian conquest of Jerusalem *was* imminent and inevitable -- until Hezekiah prayed! Hezekiah's prayer of repentance and faith -- in which he lifted up and glorified the LORD of hosts, honouring him as holy and as sovereign -- marks the very moment the battle was turned back.

For as soon as Hezekiah (who, as king, represented his people) prayed, God answered.

And so Hezekiah's prayer marks the climax of the narrative and stands as a pivotal moment in history. Hezekiah's prayer marks the moment that the LORD of hosts was lifted up as the glorious the crown of the remnant of his people and the battle was turned back at the gate. (Isaiah 28:5-6)

In chapters 34-35 (pinnacle of the oracle series) Isaiah makes it very clear that this is more than mere history -- this is type; it is prophecy to be applied universally.

What we have here is theology *and* precedent: words *and* pictures!

God is so gracious -- for when testing times are upon us and we are afraid (wracked with misplaced fear) -- theology can suddenly seem quite inadequate and even unreasonable.

Consider Isaiah 30:15 -- *For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength."*

This is a beautiful verse, until you put into it context: the armies of "Sennacherib" are bearing down upon you! In context it is actually profoundly challenging!

BUT then we also have the precedent: Jerusalem *was* delivered when Hezekiah returned to the way of faith and put his trust in the Lord, giving *him* the honour, that *he* might be glorified.

I believe that what we have here in Isaiah 1-39, is an unambiguous treatise on how the people of God are to respond to suffering and persecution, even existential threat. The end does not justify the means -- *Means Matter!* We must respond in covenantal faithfulness, trusting our faithful covenant-keeping God who saves by grace through faith!

God has called me to be an advocate for his suffering, persecuted Church.

To enable me to fulfil this calling, he has graciously afflicted me with a deep agony, an unshakable empathy, for the persecuted.

It grieves me to see that so much suffering is actually the consequence of poor policy -- not just of Western governments, but of Christian organizations and churches: bad choices, bad alliances -- "Covenants with death" God calls them in Isaiah 28. (I have chapter on this subject in which I mention (briefly) some of the worst cases I have seen.)

I want things to change. To that end, I have written this book, which is essentially an open letter to the Church in which I unpack Isaiah 1-39 and apply its message -- its radical call to radical faith -- to our contemporary circumstances.

I believe God both prepared and then commissioned me to write this book.

I have done it; now I give it back to him with the prayer that he will bless it and multiply it -- for the sake of the Church and for the glory of his holy name.

AMEN