

***Turn Back the Battle: Isaiah speaks to Christians today (Deror Books, Dec 2012)***  
***By Elizabeth Kendal***

***Synopsis***

***To establish the context for Isaiah's message:***

*Turn Back the Battle* juxtaposes:

- the situation facing God's people in the latter part of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC ***with***
- the situation facing the church in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century AD.

Situation facing God's people in the latter part of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC:

***Escalating hostility:*** superpower Assyria had imperialistic ambition to expand west into the Levant so as to gain access to resources and the Mediterranean Sea. In the interests of national security, emerging power Egypt sought to exploit the Levant as a buffer zone to keep Assyria at bay. Amongst the city states and nations of the Levant, the hottest foreign policy issue of the day was whether to align with Assyria or with Egypt or to pursue a policy of independence. Consequently the Middle East was a whirlpool of conspiracies, threats and military violence.

***Declining security:*** as a provincial and independent nation located in that buffer zone, Judah was extremely vulnerable. Whenever Assyrian imperialistic zeal erupted, Judah came under extreme pressure and even faced existential threat.

Situation facing the church today:

***Escalating hostility:*** local and global tensions are escalating as numerous strategic trends are converging -- trends such as rapid population growth, rapid urbanisation, cultural collapse, economic stress and rising religious fundamentalism. As trends converge, hardship, criminality, chaos, intolerance and conflict all escalate. Along with this, we have entered a period of global transition as new power blocs form and power struggles ensue, both within and between those blocs.

***Declining security:*** Christians are finding themselves besieged due primarily to *Culture Change* driven by the revival of fundamentalist Islam, the rise of political and militant religious nationalism and/or the erosion of historic Judeo-Christian foundations, culture and influence. By the end of 2008, the West had lost the economic leverage it once exploited to rein in repressive regimes. Consequently, persecution is soaring as persecutors operate with impunity. Meanwhile, governments threatened by cultural collapse are pursuing social cohesion by means of authoritarian repression: rolling back rights to appease the belligerent.

It is clear that in terms of theatre, though the sets and costumes are different, the plot and script are essentially the same: God's people were then and are now facing escalating hostility amidst declining security; living amidst worldliness, faithlessness, crumbling culture and social decay while enemies are advancing, threatening repression, subjugation, violence and even genocide.

## ***God speaks into the crisis: the message of Isaiah***

Fully cognisant of the social situation, fully appreciative of the military realities, and fully aware of the local and regional political complexities, God sent Isaiah into the fray to answer the question on everyone's lips: "*Who will we trust?*"

God's word to his people -- the message of Isaiah -- was (and is): Do not put your trust in limited, sinful, mortal and/or self-interested human-beings; nor in money, politics or military might; nor in spiritually rebellious cities and the spiritually rebellious projects of proud, arrogant, self-sufficient humanity. For God is in the process of pulling down all idols and exposing them as false so that mercifully he alone -- the world's only Saviour -- will be exalted. So put your trust in your faithful, covenant-keeping God, for he loves you with an everlasting love and has promised to save you. But he saves by grace through faith; so if you won't stand in faith, then you won't stand at all.

### ***To illustrate the message and establish the precedent***

*Turn Back the Battle* juxtaposes:

- faithlessness and its consequences  
*with*
- faithfulness and its rewards.

Faithlessness and its consequences

is typified through the narrative of King Ahaz who, in 735 BC, at the height of the Syro-Ephraimite war, faithlessly rejected God's gracious offer of salvation, opting instead for a military intervention from Assyria, the regional superpower. The consequence: Judean sovereignty was forfeit and long-term security was compromised.

Faithfulness and its rewards

is typified through the narrative of King Hezekiah who, in 701 BC, when the battle was literally "at the gate", sought the Lord in repentance and faith. The consequence: King Hezekiah's prayer (Isaiah 37:14-20) marks the pivotal moment when faith is exercised, the Lord of hosts is honoured and glorified and the battle is turned back at the gate.

### ***Speaking prophetically into power: Isaiah as role model***

Throughout all this – from 735 BC to 701 BC – Isaiah stands a role-model for all who would advocate on behalf of the persecuted and for the security of God's people. For while Isaiah petitioned kings, he never put his faith in those kings or in the military or economic power they could wield. Nor did Isaiah invest faith in any political process or in his own diplomatic prowess. His faith was always in the Lord of hosts who he trusted to be true to his promises. Consequently, Isaiah could faithfully speak the word of God prophetically *into* power without ever being tempted to compromise either the message or himself in pursuit of political or personal gain.

### ***Choose you this day . . .***

With persecution and insecurity escalating and intensifying globally and rapidly, the 21<sup>st</sup> century church has a critical choice to make. It is the same choice faced by kings Ahaz and Hezekiah: will we, in pride, arrogance and a spirit of self-sufficiency, put our trust in limited, corrupted human-beings, human works and human power *or* will we, in humble dependence and faith, put our trust in our immortal, Almighty God who is eternally faithful and able to save? It is indeed a critical choice, for only when we, in *faith*, honour and glorify the Lord of hosts, will God, in *grace*, provide strength to those who turn back the battle.