

To God Alone Be The Glory

Bullies. What good are they? It thrills them to wield power over those whom they see as weak. And does it really matter if the intimidator is male or female, a school bully, a work place bully, a bully in the church, or a bully related to you? I suspect each of us has had some experience dealing with bullies. But let's say you're a father or a mother trying to handle a neighborhood bully. One day your children come home crying because so-n-so pushed them down and took their toys. When you've calmed yourself down enough to keep from strangling the monster on sight, you take your children by the hand, march down the street right onto the bully's own turf, and confront him to his face: "You stay away from my children or you'll have to deal with **me**." *A week passes. Your children are playing in your own back yard, having a great time. All of a sudden you notice that you're not hearing any noises. You go to the back window, but you don't see the children. So you quietly slip through the front door. As you round the corner of the house, there he is, that no-good bully. He's got both of your children pinned to the ground, and he's laughing at them as they whimper and weep at his terrors. "Now what do I have here?" you demand. But you're not really asking for information. And the bully knows it.

Now switch to the children's point of view. How were they feeling just before you came around the corner? Terrorized, victimized, demoralized. They certainly understood their loss of freedom. They had a taste of grief. But when you rounded the corner and they heard your voice, they tasted the sweet relief of triumph!

Now you can better see things from God's perspective as he reviewed the history of his people Israel through the prophet Isaiah in our sermon text. *⁴This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "At first my people went down to Egypt to live; lately, Assyria has oppressed them."* You may remember how Egypt enslaved Israel, and how the Lord sent Moses to lead his people through the Red Sea and the desert to the promised land (Exodus 1 – 14). *You may have learned from your study of Bible history how Israel became a kingdom (1 Samuel 10) and later split into two kingdoms (1 Kings 12). The Northern Kingdom was led by wicked kings only. When the northern kings and people refused to listen to the many prophets the Lord sent, he brought in the terrifying Assyrians, who carried the Northern Kingdom into captivity and then attacked the Southern Kingdom (2 Kings 17 – 18).

That's what had recently happened in Isaiah's day. But when the Lord asks in our text, ⁵*Now what do I have here?*, the Lord is looking into the future, to when Babylon, on deck to be the next bully in the world, would take the Southern Kingdom into captivity. It was going to be a difficult time for God's people, a time of grief. So the Lord graciously caused Isaiah to preach comfort to his people, people who hadn't even been born yet. I can't imagine writing a sermon a century and a half before it would reach its intended audience. But God always knows what he's doing. A hundred and fifty years from Isaiah's day, Babylon would knock down the gates of Jerusalem and destroy the precious temple, and their sense of identity along with it. So God's people would need this message from him at that time.

Just listen to God's message. ¹*Awake, awake, O Zion, clothe yourself with strength. Put on your garments of splendor, O Jerusalem, the holy city.* He's talking to all his people at that future time, whether they are captives in Babylon or are among those few left behind in Jerusalem. His people would give up all hope. Their grief would make them behave like they were asleep. Grief can do that, you know. They would believe God was letting them rot. Some would be apathetic toward God. Some would get caught

up in the sins of Babylonian society, perhaps even worshiping their false gods. To these people the Lord says: *Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength and splendor.* In other words, don't just lie there on the ground under the bully's hand—open your eyes and see what your God will do for you. Do you really believe the Lord won't rescue you? Listen: the Lord already has in mind that a future king named Cyrus, of the future world power Persia, will send the Jews back home from Babylon. And Cyrus will require other nearby nations to help pay for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Please understand: when the Lord tells his people: wake up, get dressed, ²*Shake off your dust; rise up, sit enthroned, O Jerusalem. Free yourself from the chains on your neck, O captive Daughter of Zion...* When the Lord says this, it would be absurd to think that the people could accomplish any of these things by themselves. "*Free yourself from the chains on your neck*"? Chains are not designed to be thrown off by the prisoner. But when God's power steps in, chains fall off by themselves, like they did for the apostle Peter in the middle of the night after Herod had arrested him and bound him with chains (Acts 12). So you see, although God is commanding the people to take action, he himself is the one who will bring about the result. He

will rescue his people from bully Babylon. But it will take a while. So the people are to wait patiently and not lose heart.

Do we see how this applies to us? Remember how I said it would be 150 years before the Israelites would hear Isaiah's sermon? Well, it would be 2,700 years before the people of St John Lake City would hear Isaiah's message. But for such a people as you the Lord spoke through his prophet! How can I be certain the Lord is looking as far ahead as us? Because the Lord says to Jerusalem, ^{1b}*The uncircumcised and defiled will not enter you again.* 'Not enter you again?' The city Jerusalem has had all kinds of impenitent unbelievers coming and going to this day. But the new Jerusalem, the invisible Church, which is made up of only believers in Jesus—the impenitent never enter it! Those who are not sorry for their sins never enter the Holy Christian Church. And this is why, dear friends, New Testament believers have properly understood Isaiah's message as applying also to us. Thus Judah's captivity in Babylon is a picture of the spiritual captivity we face today.

Here's what I'm getting at. Although Jesus has crushed Satan's head and destroyed his power to accuse us, we are still tempted by him. Although Jesus has declared us not-guilty of all

sin, we go on sinning. Although Jesus shattered death for us on Easter, believers are still leaving this life through death. So even though we are free in Christ Jesus, we don't feel the full freedom yet. Even though our Lord is on his way to get these bullies off us, and therefore we are assured the final victory, we're still pinned down in a certain sense. To children waiting for a parent to rescue them from the bully, it seems like an eternity of waiting. "Where are you, Mommy? Why don't you find me, Daddy?" In the same way, it's not yet time for the Lord to come and rescue us from our sinning and our dying. Illnesses can last a long time too. Then there are the earthly consequences that come upon us because of foolish choices we made in the past. We know we're completely forgiven already for Jesus' sake, but the aftermath of our sin remains as a weighty reminder not to repeat such folly.

Do we have people today who are spiritually nodding off to sleep? Like the Israelites we are believers, but for one reason or another, we give in to the enemy rather regularly. *Perhaps we are suffering grief because a loved one has died. We don't want to grieve like the people who have no hope, but because our faith is weak, we can keep God's sure promises from comforting our hearts: "I just don't want to hear it

right now. I'm a little angry with God for taking my loved one from me."

*But most of us are not grieving. Do we treat any sinful pleasures as worth more than Christ? Are we letting our interest in the things of this world choke our faith so that we are nodding off in the stupor of self-gratification? *These things are spiritual bullies pinning us down. And we, instead of crying out, "Heavenly Father, please come and get 'em off me," do we instead say, "Beer, you are my truest friend... wine, liquor, shopping, chatting, food, gambling, nature, videos, games—my other friends, come help me forget my troubles for a while." If so, we have fallen asleep spiritually. And to us our loving Lord says, ¹*Awake, awake!* Think about what is really important. *Clothe yourself with strength. Put on your garments of splendor.*" The Lord Jesus has prepared for you the splendorous robe of his righteousness to cover over your sinful shortcomings. It's yours. It's beautiful. Put it on. There you go! Now you're beautiful too in Jesus' sight, as if the Church is his dear bride.

³*This is what the LORD says: "You were sold for nothing, and without money you will be redeemed."* By these words our God is showing contempt for our bullies. They don't have to pay God anything when they attack us. God

permits them to conquer anyone who disobeys him. And he uses such spiritual bullies to give us a taste of what happens when people stray from him. *But here's the marvelous part. Because our spiritual bullies didn't pay God for the privilege of pouncing on us, the Lord doesn't have to give them one red cent when he rescues us. Neither do we. He's saying, "I've decided to make you mine again."

The Lord also says, ⁵*"My people have been taken away for nothing, and those who rule them mock. And all day long my name is constantly blasphemed."* Can you hear how disgusted the Lord is with our spiritual bullies? Not only will he rescue us, he will take vengeance on them. We will triumph in Christ.

⁶*Therefore my people will know my name; therefore in that day they will know that it is I who foretold it. Yes, it is I.*" Just as Judah was released from Babylon 150 years after the Lord made that promise, so we will be released from the difficulties of this life when our Lord Jesus keeps his promise and returns with all his holy ones. Then we will see that **IN CHRIST WE ARE TRULY SAINTS TRIUMPHANT**, just like God has promised.