

ROGER ELLSWORTH

There may be many warm-hearted Calvinistic teachers and preachers serving in small communities or little churches in urban areas. Roger Ellsworth comes out of this same tradition where knowing God and experiencing the real thing is what matters. He is blessed by that tie of Reformed, Calvinistic doctrine balanced with application to daily life and spiritual experiences. He is of like mind with these other preachers, and works diligently to teach and preach and write in his own style.

His wife, Sylvia, has profited from his experiential preaching and teaching. And her marriage to Roger has obviously benefited as both learned about loving leadership and quiet submission through application of biblical truth to their own experiences. Sylvia attests to the value of experiencing authentic Christianity:

It has been a tremendous privilege to hear Roger preach and teach God's Word week after week, year after year. I never tire of hearing him. After thirty-seven years, I still eagerly anticipate his sermon in every service because I know I will not only learn more about the things of God, but my heart will be warmed to God and thus challenged to better live for Him."¹

She has been blessed by this tie that binds hearts together in sweet fellowship because they share the same beliefs and similar spiritual experiences.

Roger Ellsworth developed his own style of warm-hearted Calvinistic preaching through a lot of trial and error and one day running across a book by Martyn Lloyd-Jones. From him he learned how to look for principles and to relate them to Bible themes. Ellsworth does not isolate a passage to its immediate context alone, but seeks to see how that context illustrates a biblical theme such as salvation through Christ Jesus alone, the sovereignty of God in redemption, the coldness of men and women without the Holy Spirit,

and the inevitability of Judgment Day. He is also involved in a two-front battle against using psychology for church growth and relevancy, on the one hand, and Dispensationalism on the other. I have listened to his sermons and read his books. He has taught me to always see the principles within biblical themes and to put my gospel spectacles on to see Jesus in every passage. Now I see Christ in Leviticus and Moses as an example of Jesus as our mediator and David as representative of Christ the King. Through his many books, you can learn to apply those principles in your language and to your culture.

Lessons From Martyn Lloyd-Jones

After graduating from Midwestern Baptist Seminary in Kansas City, Mo. in 1970, Roger Ellsworth found himself dried out spiritually. His seminary experience drained him because it confronted him with the controversy emerging within Southern Baptist life over the inerrancy and authority of the Bible. Like all controversies, it served some good by clarifying doctrinal issues for him. Roger was able to defend his position that the Bible is without error and has the authority to tell us what to believe and how to live. He could reason and defend. But, the debate took its toll. His soul was like withered grass.

He accepted a pastorate in Marshall, Illinois, a small town of about 3,000 people near the Indiana border. One day, while browsing in a local bookstore, his eye caught a book on the bottom shelf, *Ephesians 3*, by Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He had never heard of the London pastor, but while reading these sermons, his heart was strangely warmed. "This is what I believe," Roger noted to himself. Rushing streams of water nourished his soul. God had chosen to water Roger's dry soul through experiential preaching and a Reformed perspective. He read everything by Lloyd-Jones he could

get his hands on! And he learned some very important lessons.

The first lesson was the reaffirmation that God would be faithful to bless his preaching. It was not as if Roger was new at this. From age eleven, he had opportunities to preach. In the fall of 1959, he was burdened that God wanted him to do "something." While he was sick that winter, the burden intensified and he told his father and his pastor. The pastor had already thought that God might have His hand upon Roger in a special way and so suggested he give a devotional before the church. It was on Hebrews 9:22, "And according to the law almost all things are purged with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission." As a result, Roger was called the "boy preacher" and invited to speak thirty-six times in 1960, seventy-two times in 1961, and more than one hundred in 1962 in various churches in Illinois. "Church attendance was declining and they thought a "boy preacher" would draw people in," he explained.² This sounds unusual, but this early mark for the ministry was similar to William Jay and Charles Spurgeon. Remember how Mr. Winter felt led to mentor William Jay, giving him many preaching opportunities in rented halls and on cottage steps? (see chapter 4) And Charles Spurgeon was only nineteen when he left his country church for London; he already had a couple of years experience. So now, Roger, like Spurgeon, also was pastor of a small church in his teens, in Panama, Illinois, while attending high school and college and then another one during seminary days. And now as he read Lloyd-Jones while continuing to preach, he was struck with the majesty and faithfulness of God and encouraged to expect God's blessings on his ministry.

Next, Ellsworth was taught how to handle the scriptures. He had a working knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, but now Lloyd-Jones taught him, by example, that understanding the context of each

passage within the framework of the overriding theme of redemption through Jesus Christ was vastly more important. He learned to look for Christ in Old as well as New Testament passages. The sovereignty of God hit him in the face. Like Ernie Reisinger, he learned to ask the right questions. "If we ask the wrong questions, we will get the wrong answers." ³ He asked questions such as: Which of the Bible's great themes are seen in this passage? What is the theme of the book and chapters around it? What is the foundational, life-affecting principle here? How should this principle be applied today? Now he began to see the glory of redemption as he prepared his sermons. And seeing this glory led to spiritual experiences of wonder and marvel, watering his own heart in the process. He learned to see *But, God...* as he read biblical passages detailing sin, perverseness, and the wilderness of life. The sovereignty and sufficiency of God began to take hold of him and his Arminian Dispensationalism began to fall further away. Putting emphasis on the context of the passage and enveloping that in great sweeping themes was, for him, a different way of handling the scripture with marvelous results for his soul.

Back in college at Southern Illinois University, a classmate, Richard Belcher, had introduced the Doctrines of Grace to Roger. But, now Martyn Lloyd-Jones confirmed and broadened his thinking, introducing him to Reformed thinkers like J. I. Packer, John Stout, William Hendrickson. Roger heard about R. C. Sproul too, and his Ligonier Ministry material just solidified the doctrinal foundation being laid by Lloyd-Jones. He read Francis Schaeffer and Ernest Reisinger as well. He started reading Puritans like John Owen and William Sibbs and R. Traill. Brought up on an Illinois farm by devout Christian parents, Roger was taught the fundamentals of Christianity. But, his interpretation was from an Arminian Dispensational viewpoint: man chose God and the Old Testament

was all about Israel. But now, as he studied and approached the scriptures asking new questions, that all changed. He became Calvinistic and Reformed, believing in the usefulness of confessions of faith. Like Ernie Reisinger, he began to see Dispensationalism, in even its mildest forms, as doing violence to the gospel of Christ.

I have to say that any scheme that suggests that God tried first one way of salvation and then another way before finally deciding to send his Son is denying that Christ has always been the one and only way of salvation. And any scheme that suggests that Christ came to this earth with no intent of dying on the cross but rather with the intent of setting up an earthly kingdom and, when that kingdom was rejected, had to go to the cross as a 'fall-back plan,' denies that He was slain from the foundation of the world.⁴

He found he was not alone but had a proud heritage and blessed ties with people across the centuries and with the founders of his own denomination, the Southern Baptists. Lloyd-Jones had taught him the majesty of God, the urgency of the message, and the solemnity of his responsibility. And Roger and Sylvia have passed this on to me, a lowly Sunday School and Children's Church leader.

And, of course, Ellsworth learned from the doctor how to think in principles. He also learned to look for guiding generalizations on which to base applications. This helped avoid getting mired in the details, making them the focus and a burden, rather than seeing a general foundational principle useful spiritually and in daily living. For instance, in studying I Corinthians 12, Roger points out,

A careful study of Paul's treatment of this vital subject makes it quite clear he was far more concerned with the principles behind the gifts than with the gifts themselves. We have isolated the following major principles: there is great diversity in the Spirit's giving (12:4-10; all the gifts are for the good of the church (12:7); the Spirit decides who gets what gifts (12:11,18); and the fact that there is a diversity of gifts doesn't threaten the unity of the church(12:12-27).⁵

He then applies this by focusing on the sovereignty of God and the diversity of the gifts:

Instead of worrying about what gifts exist today and what our gift or gifts may be, we should simply concern ourselves with serving our Lord in as many ways as we possibly can. If we faithfully do this with the right spirit, we may rest assured our Lord will be pleased and our reward will be great.⁶

Learning how to think in principles and then apply them under the umbrella of the Bible's major themes was a valuable lesson.

Ellsworth Hones His Own Skills

He developed his own style. Experiential preaching was the tradition, but mid-western United States in the 1970's-2000's was the culture. He learned to apply a passage early in order to quickly build a bridge between the text and the listener. The culture demanded that. What do these ancient words have to say to me right now in this day of sophisticated media and communications? Roger wants to show how important and vital and practical the passage is. So he is direct and urgent in his appeal. And, like Martyn Lloyd-Jones and Ernest Reisinger and Charles Spurgeon, he is always evangelistic. How could he be otherwise since his practical sermons are Christ-driven. Christ and salvation is always the overall theme of the passage--no matter if it is in the Old Testament. As already noted, he, like Ernie Reisinger, has tossed aside Dispensationalism with its divisions and tensions between God's people and between grace and law. And, of course, with this view, he wants his worship services to have a consciousness of God's presence. Those minutes should be totally different from the rest of the week. Do not bring the world inside. Do not ask the wrong questions. Do not use the Bible as a grab-bag to dispense psychology.⁷ Roger took the lessons from Martyn Lloyd-Jones and developed his own style.

His greatest admirer, his wife Sylvia, praises his style. "The thing I most appreciate about Roger's preaching is the glorious way

he presents the Gospel and the mercy and grace of God in salvation."⁸

Writing To Repay A Debt

Feeling a burden to give back, Roger Ellsworth published his first book in 1988, *Come Down, Lord*. He had been so helped by authors; he wanted to follow their example. Since then, he has published twenty-eight books and contributed numerous articles for periodicals and other books. Early on, he disciplined himself to write out at least one sermon a week. He now prints that in pamphlet form and distributes it each week to his church members. Back issues are available to anyone who needs one. "Writing forces you to be precise in your thinking," he says. Several books have been translated into German, Portuguese, Korean, Polish, or French through the efforts of Evangelical Press. One person writes of sending copies of *The Shepherd King* to pastors in Ethiopia and Gambia,

This brother, like many to whom I write, has little access to healthy Christian books and also faces considerable opposition from the local Muslim population. I share this with you because I thought you would be encouraged to learn how the Lord is using your written ministry, and also to say keep on with this. Your clear style with comparatively short sentences make your books good to send these third world pastors.⁹

Perhaps you could give away these books too. People everywhere seem to want fast, easy-to-read material. I used his books with a ladies home Bible study. We divided up the book into a specified number of lessons (usually eight) and used those designated chapters for our devotions, attempting to apply the principles he discusses. Then, we focused on a particular Bible passage for our time together looking for the principles, themes, and applications.

Titles such as *The God of All Comfort: Reflections in Isaiah*, *Opening up Philipians*, *Christ Above All: 22 Daily Readings from*

Colossians, The Life of Moses catch the eye. He has 46 books in print as of 2012 and he is still writing. Visit him at www.rogerellsworth.com. Why not read some yourself or use them as daily devotional material or group Bible study? Remember, they are representative of applicational preaching and teaching, helping the average Christian to experience real Christianity, practical religion, and knowing God. There is always an element of evangelism present. I wonder who will discover one on a dusty bottom shelf one day and, like Roger, have his/her heart strangely warmed.....

Passing The Lessons On

Each of the men we have reviewed were valiant warriors for the faith--guardians of the truth to pass on to the next generation. Theirs is a fight of faith and in the right spirit--humble, gentle, kind. Remember Matthew Henry's struggles with the government's restrictions and John Newton's desire to communicate truth in a new way through songs? William Jay's battle was chiefly against those who took obedience out of the Christian life. Roger Ellsworth has fought against two main opponents. Like Spurgeon, his early battles were with those who downgraded the authority of the scripture, looking at it as if it could change or include errors. From 1986-96, he served on the Board of Southeastern Baptist Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. During this time conservatives were slandered as power hungry; they had to stand up to much stress before successfully pushing liberalism back. Ellsworth served on the nominating committee which brought in Paige Patterson as President. "I admire him for his courage. He was like Martin Luther."¹⁰ The seminary was just one front of this battle for the Bible which had raged since Roger's own school days. Roger Ellsworth stayed in there, and, like Spurgeon, held firm. The Southern Baptist Convention reaffirmed its belief in the inerrancy

and authority of the Bible.

Another battle is poking its head up now. Like Martyn Lloyd-Jones, this warm-hearted Calvinist keeps his nose to the ground examining the times in which he lives. Just as Ernest Reisinger took his stand, from his sixties on, to warn of the dangers of Dispensationalism's division of God's people between the Old and New Testaments and its tensions between the law and the gospel, Roger is also faced with a new foe. It is whether the message of the scripture is about Christ and redemption and sin *or* a practical handbook for solving life's problems. "So often we impose our framework on a passage or grab a passage hoping to get help with our problems and miss the whole point of the scripture," Roger explained.¹¹ His book on Moses is filled with warning of the danger of departing from the great themes:

The largest challenge facing the modern day church is convincing people of the reality and enormity of their sins. No one will come to the Saviour until he sees himself as a sinner. Many in the church seem to be bent on offering salvation to people who see no need for it.¹²

There is not a hair-breadth's change in the true God since that ancient day. He is still the God who flames with glory and holiness, and, just as Israel of old could not approach him except through the mediatorial work of Moses, so we can know him only through the true Mediator whom Moses was intended to foreshadow. That Mediator is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim.2:5). But many do not want this kind of God. They prefer one who is user-friendly and seeker-sensitive. As the Israelites thought of themselves as being sovereign in the area of worship, so it is easy for us to think of ourselves in the same way. We pride ourselves on knowing what is best and what 'sells.' And a majestic, glorious God who is clothed in mystery and condemns sin is not what sells.¹³

Yet, he is not opposed to facing life's problems. Balancing doctrine with love, warm hearts, and devotion to God leads to a desire to live more patiently, humbly before God. Even the practical how-to's in Titus 2 are outgrowths of the sweeping biblical themes.

("But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine..." Titus 2:1.) Roger wants to promote life choices based on principle like Matthew Henry proposed. But, he, like any warm-hearted, Calvinistic preacher, is against misusing the Bible as a grab-bag for easy solutions. Applying biblical principles and understanding sweeping themes are very different from using scripture as a psychological text. There is much more to a study of Moses than examining leadership skills. For this reason, Roger Ellsworth wants to help prepare the next generation of preachers. He is concerned about "canned preaching" claiming to be relevant but actually being void of Christ and spiritual principles. He dreams of teaching others how to handle the Bible.

In an article written for *Dear Timothy: Letters On Pastoral Ministry*, he advises young pastors to always speak of the Bible's theme of redemption through Christ and in a way that conveys its glory and grandeur. Instruct within the contextual theme of the chapter and relate that to the Bible's theme of redemption exclusively through Jesus Christ. He shows how to do this in his exposition of Isaiah 40, *The God of All Comfort*, where he shows the deliverance and restoration from Babylon to be a small picture of God's far greater work in delivering from sin and condemnation.

Make no mistake about it, that deliverance is the result of our mighty God working on our behalf.. No one can take a shred of credit for himself on this matter of salvation. It is all God's doing. He, the mighty deliverer planned our redemption before the world began; then, in the fulness of time, he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to work it out.¹⁴

In addition, he uses God's plan through Christ to draw a picture of the strength and tenderness of God and then has the reader read in the New Testament and Psalms. Relying on the strength and mercy of God is an example of a "spiritual experience." The relying is really a mental process, but it leads to wonder and love for God. It is

what knowing God is all about. After an experience like that of real Christianity, his application is direct: Be eager to live for Him: "What a God we have! Mighty to deliver! Tender in disposition! How very eager we should be to live for him!"¹⁵

Oh, for more pastors and Bible study teachers who have developed this skill. Or for more listeners who long to truly know God and to experience the real thing. We can practice recognizing warm-hearted Calvinism when we hear it, knowing how much we will profit from it. Perhaps you could give someone a copy of J. C. Ryle's, *Practical Religion*, or J. I. Packer's *Knowing God*, or William Plumber's, *Vital Godliness* with a pamphlet by Roger slipped into the cover... Or enclose one of these books in a box of one of Roger's books sent to Africa or Eastern Europe or an inner city church in Chicago or London or New Delhi.

Promoting Spiritual Experience

Read "Our Deliverer and Shepherd" at the end of this chapter. It is not a sermon, but it illustrates some principles of experiential preaching Roger learned from Martyn Lloyd-Jones' example. Expository preaching is giving the meaning of the passage. And that, in this tradition, is not done in laborious detail, but in general principles made easy to grasp. It should be understood. "Being understood is far better than being impressive," Roger told beginning pastors.¹⁶ Remember John Newton's little songs and William Jay's *Morning Exercises*? Think back to Charles Spurgeon's Victorian language and illustrations. They all made the gist of the passage and the great theme of redemption understandable and promoted real spiritual experience in the process. And remember Martyn Lloyd-Jones' emphasis on thinking in first principles so you could make logical deductions like a doctor making a diagnosis? He was teaching how to think so they could handle the scriptures

rightly. Roger Ellsworth speaks to his current audience, not like a Lloyd-Jones, Spurgeon, or a Puritan, or even like Ernest Reisinger, but in the language of his mid-west hearers and world readers who are in a hurry and want to get the sweeping themes without more information over-load. He wants to teach others how to promote real spiritual experiences rather than using the Bible as a handy tool for solving life's difficulties.

For example, at the end of *The Shepherd King*, he sums up the lessons learned from David's life with two laws or principles. "It is our responsibility to be aware of these laws and to live in the light of them."¹⁷ These easy principles are: We reap what we sow; God's grace overrules. Ellsworth looks at David's life as a monument to God's grace and His ability to carry out His plan of salvation step-by-step. Urging his readers to put aside discouragement over the evils of our day and take comfort because "As God had a plan then, so he does today. His plan today is part of that plan. It is a continuation of it. The Christ who was coming to this earth to provide redemption will one day return to consummate it."¹⁸ Relying on this truth leads to this real spiritual experience of going from the faded flower of discouragement to a heart warmed and strengthened by knowing the faithfulness and sufficiency of God.

And, of course, this kind of preaching and teaching and writing has to be applicable but not necessarily psychological. There is a difference. Psychological concentrates on solving our problems. Right preaching is God-centered and oriented toward the Bible's themes. Roger urges preachers to persuade and plead with authority.¹⁹ They are not to be information dispensers, but to speak forth biblical principles with force. And to bring it down to the life and heart. Those principles are "to be felt, enjoyed, and

practically applied."²⁰

Experiential or experimental preaching addresses the vital matter of how a Christian experiences the truth of biblical, Christian doctrine in his life....It aims to apply divine truth to the whole range of the believer's personal experience, including his relationships with family, the church, and the world around him.²¹

In the attached quote from *Be Patient God Hasn't Finished With Me Yet!*, Ellsworth does this with Isaac. Do we resist the Word, or give priority to its demands? Observe how he weaves Isaac's resistance to God's sovereign decree to choose Jacob, but not Esau, into the main theme of the essential nature of salvation being "all of grace." Then watch as he cuts to the quick. He is direct and to the point as to whether we are resisting God's word in turning away from the doctrine of election. Turning from our unbelief and wanting things our way is a spiritual experience worth promoting. You could do this with your Sunday school class of any age. Or even with your own children or grandchildren as you read the Bible together.

Sylvia Ellsworth illustrates this kind of spiritual experience. When talking about the blessings of sitting under Roger's preaching for thirty-seven years, she does not list all of her "solved" problems. Instead, she notes that seeing the mercy and grace of God through his preaching has resulted in "...the worship of God has become a delight to me, and I stand in awe of what Christ did to purchase my redemption. But with great privilege comes great responsibility, and I regret that I am not a better Christian in light of the opportunity that has been mine."²² Not easy solutions to life's problems but enhanced praise and joy blended with a humble desire to please God are the results experiential preachers and teachers look for. Look for youth leaders who promote praise, joy, and humility through this kind of approach to the Bible rather than ones

who entertain creating a lot of hype. Or seek to lead your family devotions this way yourself.

This is very different from looking at Isaac's family as an example of dysfunction and pulling out lessons on building strong family ties. A TV host can do that and be entertaining too! Promoting real spiritual experiences is all about how one approaches these passages and the questions one asks. *What is the over-riding theme? What are the principles? How can I apply them today?* Ellsworth wants to pass these skills on to young pastors. Why not invite him to speak? He is an itinerent preacher now.

ONLY THROUGH THE SPIRIT

Like all the other men in this study, Roger believes no spiritual experience is real or spiritual battle won without the Holy Spirit's influence and power.

We also run ahead of God when we do things that he has not commanded us to do. God has given us work to do and has given us certain ways in which to do that work. The work is spiritual work and it must be done in a spiritual way. But many Christians use the arm of the flesh to fight the battles of the Lord.

They perceive the cause of God to be growing weaker and evil to be increasingly militant. Something must be done! So they send around a petition. They organize politically. They pass resolutions.

They bring into worship things not sanctioned by the Word of God...

The pressing need for the church in these days is to lay down the sword of human wisdom and effort and give herself to prayer.

If we fight in Saul's armour, we will most certainly lose. If, like David, we go out in the power of God's Spirit, we will prevail.²³

First, the way to convert people to Christ is to set forth the truth of the gospel. Secondly, the proper way to state the truth of the gospel is with a deep sense of insufficiency, realizing the success

of the gospel depends, not on the skill of the preacher, but on the power of the Spirit. Thirdly, there is only one faith that converts sinners from the error of their ways and sets their feet on the path of life. That is the faith which comes to men through the power of God

as the truth of God is preached.²⁴

This shows his concern for today's battle with pragmatism. Will there be power to save and power to induce real spiritual experiences without truth being preached directly, simply, and with urgency?

WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH ME?

What does this have to do with us? Joel Beeke gives us an answer:

Experiential preaching, then, teaches that the Christian faith must be experienced, tasted, and lived through the saving power of the Holy Spirit.

It stresses the knowledge of scriptural truth 'which is able to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus'(2 Tim. 3:15)...Experiential preaching stresses the intimate, personal knowledge of God in Christ.²⁵

The goal is to know Him personally through the Spirit's application of knowledge to the heart. We have heard this already, especially from Ernie Reisinger and Dr. Lloyd-Jones. ...Doctrine and devotion was his theme. Knowing God is what it is all about. And now we can listen to Roger Ellsworth saying the same thing.

Perhaps your pastor needs an introduction to someone you have grown fond of--like Matthew Henry or John Newton or Roger Ellsworth. Perhaps he needs *Dear Timothy: Letters on Pastoral Ministry* on his bookshelf (Thomas K. Ascol, editor, Founders Press, Cape Coral, Fl., 2004). Many women, as well as men, were instrumental in past revival and reformation by doing what they could. What can you do?

What about taking care of yourself spiritually? Don Whitney tells us how to take our spiritual temperature in *Ten Questions To*

Diagnose Your Spiritual Health. Are you spiritually healthy, or just spiritually busy? Do you thirst for God? He helps you identify that thirst. Jonathan Edwards knew about it, "So holy desire, exercised in longings, hungerings, and thirstings after God and holiness, is often mentioned in scripture as an important part of true religion."²⁶ There it is again--true, real as contrasted with that which is not. Whitney then explains how thinking about what you have read in the Bible pays off. Pray through a Psalm; he tells you how. And read "thirst-making writers."(p. 26-28) That is what Roger Ellsworth did when he picked up Martyn Lloyd-Jones!

Warm-hearted Calvinistic preaching, teaching, or writing is discerning; it distinguishes between authentic and fake Christianity. It helps people see the difference between real and spurious faith. It is not afraid to mark the character of the unbeliever--not to judge or expose another but for self examination. It holds up the fruit of repentance and faith without being unrealistic about our failures and sin and struggles. The reformed tradition of assurance always includes an element of the inner witness of the Spirit, known only to the believer. Outward evidences are only one out of three elements of biblical assurance. But, it is an aspect of one's own life needing examination if reality matters.

Roger Ellsworth does this in a chapter on Elijah in *Standing For God*, "Phoney Repentance, Abundant Mercy." He shows the phoniness of Ahab's repentance by showing how his life did not evidence true faith. He hated the prophet, Micaiah. That was an outward evidence to him that his repentance was fake. Ahab's temporary reprieve is not evidence of true faith but of God's great mercy.²⁷ The application is to make sure your profession of faith in Christ is genuine. We should be looking for the fruits of repentance in our own inner life and the evidences in how we act and believe. At the judgment day, reality is going to matter a lot!

And, of course, as has been noted earlier, this kind of preaching and teaching helps you to think straight. Over the years, you learn to find the principles yourself, to seek out the meaning of a passage foremost. You learn to talk to yourself. To ask the right questions of the text. To recognize your wrong thinking such as "Here I am in this mess. God doesn't hear me or care! There is no one to help me!" or "I know that about God...but here I am in this terrible fix." And to turn from that to remembering His promises and His character. "I will never leave you nor forsake you." "The Lord is my strength." "I have loved you with an everlasting love." Over the years, you learn to use the doctrines of providence and sovereignty and atonement and election to steady yourself. Comfort and peace and joy come, but not like a convenient little pill. You have to think right and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to come like a strong man (Isaiah 43:14-17), sweeping into your life with transforming power. Eventually, you don't have all the answers anymore. You are humbled and find your hand on your mouth, speechless before the majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ in all His splendor of love and compassion. It is, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out, "that finally nothing matters but the fact that we are in God's hands. We and our works are nothing. It is His choosing us before the foundation of the world that matters and he will never leave us nor forsake us."²⁸

As you can see, WARM-HEARTED Calvinistic preaching and teaching has a lot to do with you. If you want to prosper spiritually, you need it. Pray for it. Esteem those who try to do it.

After more than forty years of ministry, Roger is still at it. And the process has affected his everyday life in how he applies biblical principles himself. One of the distinguishing marks of these seven men is their quality family life. Their homes were peaceful--(chaotic maybe, but with an underlying peace) and their wives were loved and cared for (even if they had to work hard to free the husband to minister to others). Sylvia Ellsworth is no exception. Neither she nor their two sons were ever ignored or neglected:

Although being a pastor puts many demands upon a man's

time, I never felt like I played second-fiddle to the church in Roger's life. No matter how busy he was, Roger always made plenty of time for me and for our sons when they were growing up. Our family life has never been neglected because of the pastorate. I have always appreciated that about Roger.²⁹

And his doctrine did not strangle family fun either. "Because Roger takes preaching and the things of God very seriously, people tend to assume that he is always a serious person. But, outside the pulpit, he is a man who likes to joke, laughs a lot, and is generally light-hearted."³⁰ I can hear the Henrys, Newtons, Jays, Spurgeons, Lloyd-Joneses, and Reisingers all saying a similar thing about their family life. Sound doctrine applied to the heart and life shows itself in our family lives. That is certainly a motivation to seek experiential doctrine and devotion, treasuring it in ourselves and others.

Roger Ellsworth is part a long tradition and is blessed by that tie that binds people together because of doctrinal unity and similar spiritual experiences.

EXAMPLES OF HIS WRITINGS

In this devotional, Roger Ellsworth attempts to examine nuggets of comfort from Isaiah. Notice how he points out its comfort for Judah during their time in Babylon but goes on to show its application to the church today and its eternal implications as well.

"Our Deliverer and Shepherd," (*The God of All Comfort*, (Evangelical Press, Darlington, England, 2004,) p.12-19.

"ISAIAH 40:10-11"

'Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand,

**And his arm shall rule for him;
Behold, his reward is with him,
And his work before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
He will gather the lambs with his arm,
And carry them in his bosom,
And gently lead those who are with young.'**

The prophecy of Isaiah falls into two major sections. The first section (chapters 1-39) deals with events in Judah during Isaiah's life. This section features the prophet calling his people to repent of their sins and warning them that they will be taken captive in Babylon if they refuse to do so.

In the second section (chapters 40-66), the prophet looks beyond his own time and the impending captivity of his people to the end of that captivity and their restoration to their own land. Because these chapters talk about the future, some have argued that Isaiah could not have written them. This view assumes that God could not have given Isaiah a preview of the future. It goes without saying that God, who is unlimited in power and wisdom, was perfectly able to do so.

Furthermore, it is altogether reasonable to believe he would do so. Matthew Henry writes: 'Before God sent his people into captivity he furnished them with precious promises for their support and comfort in their trouble; and we may well imagine of what great use to them the glorious, gracious light of this prophecy was in that cloudy and dark day, and how much it helped to dry up their tears by the rivers of Babylon.'

We look at this portion of Isaiah's prophecy because we stand as much in need of comfort as those ancient captives in Babylon. As they experienced despondency and depression over their circumstances, so do many of God's people today. As many of them faced the pressure of trying to be faithful in the midst of a hostile culture, so do many saints today. As many of them nurtured doubts about whether God's promises regarding them would be fulfilled, so many Christians today struggle with questions and doubts.

Time spent in these latter chapters of Isaiah looking for comfort is time well spent. Encouragement and consolation abound here, so much so that we will only attempt to study some of the comforting verses in these chapters.

The verses before us are sweet indeed. They present us with two awe-inspiring pictures of God.

“The mighty deliverer”

Isaiah says:

**Behold, the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand,
And his arm shall rule for him;
Behold, his reward is with him,
And his work before him. (v. 10)**

With these words, Isaiah assured the people of Judah that captivity in Babylon would not be their final state. The Lord would come to them and deliver them.

That promise probably seemed too good to be true to the captive Jews. Their Babylonian captors were so very strong. Was it reasonable to expect deliverance? Isaiah's words make it clear that deliverance from captivity was not a matter of Babylon's strength but rather God's strength.

When God came to effect the deliverance of his people, the outcome would not be in doubt. God would come 'with a strong hand' and his arm would 'rule' or 'prevail' for him. In other words, God's strong arm would be sufficient for him to prevail over any foe that would seek to prevent the deliverance.

The phrase 'his reward is with him' is yet another indication of God's strength. His reward was the restoration of his people to their land. Isaiah pictures God carrying that reward in his strong arms, and the implication is that no one could wrest that blessing out of those arms. It was a blessing God was carrying to his people, and it would be delivered to them without fail. The following phrase 'And his work before him' is another way of saying the same thing. God's work or 'recompense' is the same as his reward. It is his work of deliverance and restoration, a work which would most certainly be achieved.

The deliverance of God's people from their captivity in Babylon cannot begin to compare with a far greater deliverance each and every child of God has experienced; that is, deliverance from sin and condemnation.

Make no mistake about it, that deliverance is the result of our mighty God working on our behalf. No one can take a shred of credit for himself on this matter of salvation. It is all God's doing. He, the mighty deliverer, planned our redemption before the world began; then, in the fulness of time, he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to work it out. The Lord Jesus did this by going to the cross where he defeated Satan and purchased our salvation, a salvation which was powerfully applied to us by the Holy Spirit as he opened our blind eyes, broke down our stubborn resistance to the

gospel and gave us life.

That brings us to the second picture of God in these verses.

“The Caring Shepherd”

Isaiah says:

**He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
He will gather the lambs with his arm,
And carry them in his bosom,
And gently lead those who are with young.**

The Hebrew word translated 'feed' means more than merely supplying food. Albert Barnes writes: 'It refers to all the care of a shepherd over his flock; and means to tend, to guard, to govern, to provide pasture, to defend from danger, as a shepherd does his flock.'

With these words, then, Isaiah was promising his people that in addition to delivering them, God would shepherd them. The same God who would deliver them by crushing their foes would be tender with his own people. He would not deal with them as a fierce conqueror, but rather as a shepherd caring for his sheep.

He is the self-existing, uncreated and eternal Lord, whose love and care, whose providence and power, are all unlimited and inexhaustible. Who, then, can deny that He is an All-sufficient Shepherd? In strength He is almighty; in wisdom, omniscient; in love, unequalled; in resources, unbounded! What are those evils which He cannot foresee? What is that danger which He cannot avert? Where is that enemy whom He cannot subdue? What is the name or nature of that want which He is unable to supply? The various members of His flock are as different in their age, their dispositions, and their temptations, as they are in their language, their country, and their race; and yet, the eye of the Jehovah-Shepherd observes each of His widely scattered sheep as minutely as if they were all gathered before Him at one place, and His ear is as open to their various requests as if He had only to regard the voice of a single petitioner. Indeed, His hand can administer out of the fulness of His merits, to each and all of them at any and every moment, those blessings which will prove most suitable to their case.

Joel R. Beeke, JEHOVAH SHEPHERDING HIS SHEEP

Isaiah's words about God's shepherdly care of his people must have come as a great consolation to the captives in Babylon. The very God against whom their nation had so grievously sinned had a mild and tender

disposition towards them. This tenderness is displayed again and again in the closing chapters of Isaiah. Later we find the Lord Himself saying:

**'For a mere moment I have forsaken you,
But with great mercies I will gather you.
With a little wrath I hid my face from you for a moment;
But with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you'**

(54:7-8).

As we ponder Isaiah's words further, we cannot help but note that it extends even to the very weakest, the lambs and those with young. While God shows tenderness to all his people, he is especially tender towards the young and the needy in his flock.

What encouragement these verses provide God's people today! God has not changed one iota in how he looks upon them. They are as much the objects of his tender care now as they were centuries ago.

Conscious of our many weaknesses and failings, we easily fall into the habit of thinking of God as the gigantic policeman in the skies who is always angry with his people and ever ready to bash them with his celestial truncheon. Of course, the Bible does indeed teach that God regards sin seriously and finds it necessary to chastise his children; but he does so out of a heart of love and with great tenderness.

If we doubt the tenderness of God towards his people, we only have to look at the Lord Jesus Christ who said, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep' (John 10:11). And give his life he did. On the cross, the Lord Jesus Christ purchased his flock. And now he feeds, defends and leads them.

What, dear believer, is causing your heart to ache? What is it that burdens and troubles you? Are you despondent over a set of circumstances that seem beyond your control? Are you burdened by guilt over a glaring failure to live for God? The devil will be quick to tell you that God wants nothing at all to do with you. But the cross of Calvary tells you that those same strong arms that delivered you from sin and made you God's child are there to carry you in shepherdly compassion and love. You need never doubt God's love for you. He has demonstrated it once and for all on that cross. And you may rest in that love even while you are troubled. God, your shepherd, knows about your trouble. He knows the ache of your heart. And he knows the purposes that he has for you. He has your best interest at heart in every situation of life and is sustaining you and helping you even when you feel that he has utterly forgotten you.

Young Christian, you face many trials, temptations and snares. It may seem to you that no one understands or cares. I tell you now that the Christ who loved you and died for you has a special concern for you. He knows your temptations and your feebleness, and, even when you seem completely alone, he is with you to carry you along and help you.

What a God we have! Mighty to deliver! Tender in disposition! How very eager we should be to live for him!

In the tradition of other warm-hearted Calvinists, Roger Ellsworth contrasts real Christian experience with the fake. In this way, his readers can evaluate their own repentance. He does that in this excerpt from *Standing for God*, (The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1994), "'Phoney Repentance', Abundant Mercy", p. 117-122.

'Phoney Repentance', Abundant Mercy

So it was, when Ahab heard these words, that he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning. And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, 'See how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? I will not bring the calamity in his days; but in the days of his son I will bring the calamity on his house.'

I Kings 21:27-29

One of the major problems of the church today is 'phony repentance'. Multitudes have walked down the aisle, mouthed the right words, and joined the church only to become what is delicately called 'inactive members'. All kinds of explanations have been offered for this sad state of affairs. Some attribute the problem to ineptness in 'follow up'. They argue that these inactive members came to church really wanting to serve the Lord, but no one told them how to go about it and they became discouraged and dropped out. Others say the problem is due to failing to teach new converts about a second level of Christian living. Often, we are told, we simply tell people to accept Jesus as Saviour and we fail to tell them they must also accept him as Lord. Many, therefore, have settled down in something of a halfway house. They are not lost, but neither are

they living for the Lord. They are, the argument goes, 'carnal Christians'--saved, but living as unbelievers live.

The common assumption in both of these explanations is that those who have made a profession of faith are genuinely saved. Very few seem willing to allow the possibility that many of our 'inactive members' have simply never truly come to know God at all; that their repentance was superficial and incomplete; and that, therefore, they remain in their sins.

The reluctance to talk about phoney conversions is surprising, because Scripture has so much to say on the subject. There are, for instance, the teachings of Jesus: in the Sermon on the Mount, he explicitly warned about the danger of being deceived on our standing with God (Matt. 7:21-23); in his parable of the sower, he spoke about the 'stony ground' hearer who receives the word with joy but in whom the word does not take root (Matt. 13::20-21). In addition, we have clear warnings from Paul (2 Cor. 13:5), Peter (2 Pet. 1:10-11), John (1 John 2:18-19; 5:13), and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (6:4-6; 10:26-39) on the danger of being deceived about being converted.

We also have several notable examples of spurious conversions. The names of Esau (Heb. 12:16-17), Judas Iscariot (Acts 1-16-20), Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24), and Demas (2 Tim. 4:10) are all inextricably linked to 'phoney repentance'. And here in the Old Testament we have the case of Ahab. As hard as it may be to believe, this passage says Ahab, upon hearing Elijah's message of judgement, tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, fasted, and went about mourning. It also tells us that because of this self-humiliation, God delayed sending the promised judgment.

Many would have no doubt that these verses tell us that Ahab, the arch-enemy of God and godliness, had a true and genuine conversion experience and lived for the Lord for the rest of his life. Certainly, every child of God would like to believe this. We would all like to see Ahab and Elijah strolling together on heaven's golden streets. Yet even though some of the greatest sinners in history have been plucked out of hell at the very last moment, the evidence is overwhelming that Ahab was not one of them.

Ahab's demonstration of repentance was very striking and impressive, but consider for a moment what he did not do. First, he did nothing to repudiate Jezebel or to reduce her evil influence in the kingdom. Second, he took no action to restore Naboth's vineyard to his heirs or next of kin. Third, he did not break with his idols--when he and Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, decided to go to war against the Syrians, Ahab consulted with four hundred false prophets (1 Kings 22:6). If Ahab had been truly converted, it is safe to say that he would have addressed each of these situations, but he did not.

We should also consider what Ahab said after the four hundred false prophets assured him of success in the battle against Syria but Jehoshaphat

asked to hear from 'a prophet of the Lord'. There was such a prophet, Ahab conceded, but 'I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad' (22:7-8). The fact that this prophet, Micaiah, had nothing good to say about Ahab indicates that the king of Israel had not truly repented of his sin; and Ahab's confession of his hatred for a servant of God ought to remove all question about his spiritual condition.

But if Ahab's repentance was not genuine, how are we to explain his tearing his clothes, putting on sackcloth, fasting and mourning? The answer is that these actions were all induced by fear of judgment, not by true sorrow for sin. Ahab knew Elijah extremely well by this time. He knew whatever Elijah said would most certainly come true, and he was distraught because God's judgment was hanging over him and he could not escape it. What could possibly be wrong with Ahab fearing judgment? The Bible says we must all eventually stand before God to give account of ourselves (Rom. 14:12; Heb. 9:27), and it even warns us to fear him who has the power 'to cast into hell' (Luke 12:5). So at first sight it seems somewhat unfair to criticize Ahab for being motivated by the fear of judgment.

Yet the point we must keep in mind is that the Bible tells us about judgment so we will hate our sin and turn from it. Sin is what leads to judgment. Ahab feared judgment but he did not hate his sin. He believed the Word of God but, as we have noted, would not and did not forsake the sin. He wanted to escape judgment while hanging on to his sin--and that cannot be done.

Because Ahab did not truly hate his sin, he resorted to mere outward rituals to stave off the judgment while clinging to sin within his heart. The Lord says it is all right to fast and weep and mourn, as long as these things are done with the whole heart. But if the heart is not broken there is absolutely no point in someone rending their garments (Joel 2:12-13). Ahab tore his garments, but his heart was the same as ever.

Many today are in exactly the same position. They believe the Word of God, but they will not do what it prescribes. They believe there is a God, and they believe they must some day stand before him, but they try to prepare for that day by going through the external motions of religion, and not by making a complete break with their sins. How many sit in church each Sunday with the hope that their religious observances will somehow appease God, and all the while they stubbornly refuse to turn from their sins?

But this leaves us with a tricky question. If Ahab's repentance was 'phony', why did God take note of it and decide to withhold his judgment for a time?

i. God was simply demonstrating again the greatness of his mercy. The

prophet Isaiah tells us judgment is God's 'strange' or 'unusual' act (Isa. 28:21), which shows us that God receives no pleasure or delight from judgment. His judgment is always a last resort.

ii. By delaying Ahab's judgment, God was also giving comfort to all those who read these pages. If God was good enough to spare for a while someone who had, at best, only partially repented, what will he do for the one who sincerely repents. Matthew Henry puts it like this: 'If a pretending partial penitent shall go to his house reprieved, doubtless a sincere penitent shall go to his house justified.' But as much as God delights in showing mercy, he will never compromise his word in order to show mercy. The temporary reprieve given to Ahab did not change one iota God's promise to judge Ahab and his family. The judgment finally came just as God promised.

Jesus' parable of the fig tree perfectly pictures the blend of God's mercy and judgment. In the parable, God is the owner of the fruitless fig tree. Because he is merciful he agrees to give the fig tree another year to bear fruit, but at the end of that year of mercy the fig tree is to be cut down. The message is clear. God's mercy is great, but there is an end to it (Luke 13:6-9). Ours is a time in which people seem to come lightly and easily to Christ. Deep knowledge of sin, and sincere sorrow over it are increasingly rare. Churches and preachers are so anxious to gain a following that they willingly accept all professions of faith at face value. How we need to be reminded of Ahab and his phoney repentance! Ahab teaches us two very serious and powerful lessons:

- i. It is possible to go a long way in religion and not be truly converted.
- ii. True repentance will always evidence itself in a change of attitude toward sin and in changed behavior.

May God help each of us who has made a profession of faith to bring these lessons home to our hearts and to make sure that our profession is the genuine article.

In this excerpt from "A Hard Struggle with Clear Truth," *BE PATIENT, God Hasn't Finished With Me Yet*, (Evangelical Press, Darlington, England, 2003), p. 17-22, Roger Ellsworth shows us how experiential preachers differ from those who are problem solvers with psychological tips for a better life.

"A Hard Struggle with Clear Truth"
Genesis 25:19-28

It has been rather popular in recent years to treat Isaac and Rebekah and their sons as a picture of the modern-day dysfunctional family. We may very well be able to gain lessons for family living from Isaac's family, but we mishandle this portion of Scripture if we see nothing more.

Isaac's family was not like any other. God has a special claim on them. He had called Isaac's father Abraham out of idolatry in the land of Ur and had made astounding promises to him. He had promised that Abraham would be the father of a great nation, and that through that nation all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3).

How were all other nations to be blessed through Abraham and his descendants? One of his descendants was to be the Messiah himself. God would take our humanity upon himself and in that humanity would provide forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation for his people, that is, those who would share the faith of Abraham.

Isaac, as the only son of Abraham and his wife Sarah, was the one who had been chosen to receive the promises God had made to his father. What a blessing he had received!

God speaks

Now it was time for Isaac himself to be a father. After years of waiting, his wife Rebekah had conceived. It should have been a very happy time, but Rebekah was feeling anxious. She was carrying twins, and the Bible says 'the children struggled together within her' (v. 22).

Rebekah did what every child of God should do with his or her troubles. She took them to the Lord. The hymn, 'What a Friend we have in Jesus', puts before us the wisdom of acting in the same way as Rebekah:

Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.

The Lord graciously answered Rebekah's prayer by giving this explanation:

'Two nations are in your womb,
Two peoples shall be separated from your body;
One people shall be stronger than the other,
And the older shall serve the younger'

(v. 23).

We may rest assured that Rebekah revealed the content of this divine revelation to Isaac. Therefore both Rebekah and Isaac must have known before their two sons were born that God, in exercising his sovereign prerogative, was placing the younger of the two sons, Jacob, over the older,

Esau. That would mean, among other things, that the Messiah would spring from Jacob's line, not from Esau's. So Esau himself would have to embrace the revelation of God concerning his brother.

Why would God do such a thing? Why would he place the second child over the first? Why would he place the weaker over the stronger? In other cultures it was a foregone conclusion that the firstborn would have priority. Why did God insist on reversing this pattern?

The answer is found in what we have already noted. Isaac's family was different. It was the family of the Messiah and the salvation he, the Messiah, would provide. When we look at Isaac's family, then, we must do so through this particular lens. They are not just another husband and wife and children struggling to understand and get along with each other.

By placing Jacob, the second child, over Esau, the Lord was driving home the essential nature of salvation. He was showing that it is entirely a matter of his doing. Jacob had done nothing to deserve being set over Esau. Esau had done nothing to deserve being set aside. Jacob was elevated solely because it pleased God to do so. It was sheer grace. There was absolutely nothing for which Jacob could take credit. He could not explain his elevation by saying he was stronger than Esau. He was not. He could not explain it in terms of being wiser than Esau. He proved to be, but God placed him above Esau while the two of them were still in the womb. We cannot attribute wisdom to Jacob at that stage!

God has always like to act in this particular way. He has always delighted in elevating the weak and foolish over the strong and wise. When Israel needed a king, God bypassed all the more impressive sons of Jesse and settled on unimpressive David (1 Sam. 16). When God sent his Son into this world, he bypassed Jerusalem, the religious, cultural and political centre of that region, and settled on tiny, unimpressive Bethlehem. When Jesus chose his twelve disciples, he bypassed the movers and shakers of the day, the elite of society, and settled on some fishermen, a tax-collector and a political zealot or two. The apostle Paul affirms that God operates in the very same way in this matter of eternal salvation. As a general rule, he bypasses the wise, the mighty and the noble, and settles on the foolish, the weak and the base (1 Cor. 1:26-28).

You can be absolutely sure that salvation is the result of God's grace just as much as Jacob's elevation (Rom. 9:10-13). It is not a matter of our meriting it or our working for it. It is all the product of the grace of God. It is God who chooses, calls and grants repentance and faith. If we love him, it is because he first loved us. There is not one shred of credit that a saved person can take for himself. All the glory goes to the Lord.

How sinful human nature resists this teaching! But while we resist, the

Bible insists. Just as the Lord God chose Jacob, so he has chosen each of his people. The apostle Paul affirms this in these breathtaking words: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, by which he made us accepted in the Beloved' (Eph. 1:3-6).

We have here the **fact** of election: 'He chose us'. Here we have its **time**: 'before the foundation of the world'; its **basis**: 'according to the good pleasure of his will'; and its **vehicle**: 'in Christ'. Here also is its **purpose**: 'that we should be holy and without blame before him in love'. And here is the proper **response** to it: 'to the praise of the glory of his grace'.

We may quibble all we want about why the Lord would operate in this way, but whether we like it or not, this is his way, as he made abundantly clear in his revelation to Rebekah.

Isaac resists

Isaac, for one, did not care much for God's revelation. He preferred Esau over Jacob, and, as we shall note later, was determined that Esau should be set over Jacob. Isaac was pleased enough that God had singled out his father Abraham to receive his covenant. He had no trouble with God placing him over his half-brother Ishmael to receive this same covenant. But he stumbled over the thought of God placing Jacob over Esau.

What was the reason for Isaac's preference for Esau? The account tells us that Esau was a skillful hunter (v. 27) and that Isaac loved him 'because he ate of his game' (v. 28). This is a statement of immense and staggering proportions. The issue at hand was spiritual in nature. As we have noted, it had to do with God's covenant, which included the promise of eternal salvation through the coming Messiah.

Yet all Isaac could think about was his stomach! He was willing to set aside God's clear revelation because of his interest in the temporal and perishing. There was, of course, nothing wrong with him loving Esau. Every father should love his son. But there was something wrong with him allowing that love to obscure and override what God had revealed regarding Esau. It was fine for Isaac to love Esau, but it was not fine for him to desire for Esau what God had reserved for Jacob.

Isaac's struggle to embrace the Word of God at this point speaks very pointedly to all of us who know the Lord. We have, as Isaac had, a clear word from God. We have it in Scripture. That word often binds and

constrains us. It calls us, as with Isaac, to give priority to its demands, to let it direct our loves. It calls upon us to lay aside our own comforts and desire in order to embrace what it has to say. It calls us to responsibilities that we find very difficult, speaking to us about putting our fleshly appetites and concerns over spiritual and eternal things. It says, '...seek those things which are above... Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth' (Col. 3:1-2).

The example of Isaac should give each and every child of God occasion to examine himself. How are we responding to the clear teachings of God's Word? Are we giving priority to its demands? Are we letting it direct our loves? Or are we like Isaac, putting our desires and our comforts above the Word?

Eventually Isaac came to embrace the Word of God regarding Jacob and Esau (Gen. 28:1-4). He came to understand that God's way of doing things, while it may be difficult to understand and accept, is best. But what misery and havoc he brought into his family while he was struggling to learn that lesson!

We can either learn Isaac's lesson from Isaac himself or we can learn it, as he did, from hard and bitter experience.

Always conscious of the overriding biblical themes, Roger Ellsworth uses doctrine to interpret and apply an Old Testament passage and relate it directly to the New Testament in this passage from *God of All Comfort*. No wedges between the testaments for him! That unity causes him to equate Judah and Israel with the people of God, with Christians today. The apostle Peter does the same thing in I Peter 2:9 by applying Old Testament terms such as "chosen generation," "royal priesthood," and "holy nation" to church of his day. (See the New Geneva Study Bible Notes, (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), p. 1972.)

What God Saw; What God Did

God of All Comfort, (Evangelical Press, Darlington, England, 2004), p. 195-200.

"Then the Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw

that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor; and his own righteousness, it sustained him. For he put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak." Isaiah 59:15-17.

The prophet Isaiah lived in terrible times. A good portion of his life and ministry were spent during the evil reign of Judah's worst king. Here the prophet shares some of the disturbing details of life in Judah during Manasseh's reign.

Isaiah did this in order to help the captives in Babylon understand why they were there. It was not by accident. It was not due to some unfortunate and unexpected turn in political events. They were in captivity because of their sins. He also wanted to show them that they must avoid sinful living in the future if they were to enjoy the blessings of God.

We can go yet further and say that Isaiah did this in order to keep alive their faith in the coming Messiah. He talked at length about the reality of human sin so that he could point his readers to the only one who can deal with that dark and dreadful reality: to the Lord Jesus Christ. The terrible tyranny of sin can only be met by the amazing grace of God.

We join Isaiah, then, as he looks at his own evil time and as he rejoices in the sufficiency of God's grace. Isaiah presents these truths in terms of what the Lord saw and what the Lord did.

What the Lord Saw

(vv. 15-16)

"It"

Isaiah tells us that the Lord saw two things. First, we are told the Lord saw 'it' (v. 15). What is this 'it'? It is laid out for us in the first fifteen verses of this chapter. In short, the Lord saw a society that was filled with violence (v. 3), theft (v. 3), lying (v. 3), all manner of evil speaking (v. 3), and injustice (vv. 4, 9, 11, 14).

It was a society in which people had absolutely no regard or respect for the good and virtuous. It was a time in which,

...he who departs from evil
makes himself a prey (v. 15)

Imagine it! Those who tried to both be and do good found themselves preyed upon and victimized by others. Do we not see this very thing today? Do not those who try to do the right thing often find themselves more vilified than those who do wrong? Many churches who have tried to carry out the biblical teachings on church discipline could testify to this!

So the 'it' the Lord saw was the evil of Isaiah's day in raw and undiluted form.

No intercessor

The second thing the Lord saw was that 'there was no man...no intercessor' (v. 16). The Lord saw all the sin of Judah, and he also saw that there was absolutely no one who could do anything about that sin.

Isaiah tells us that the Lord 'wondered' over this. We would say he was amazed by it. We should not take this to mean that God was amazed in the sense of being taken by surprise. God cannot be surprised. Isaiah is here simply speaking of God in human terms to help us understand, and to emphasize for us the complete inability of sinners to help themselves.

The description that Isaiah gave of his own day applies equally to us. As the Lord looks upon us, he sees the very same things--sinfulness and total inability to extricate ourselves from sin. This is, of course, unpopular teaching, and there is certainly no shortage of objectors. When they hear what Scripture says about God seeing these things, they are eager to respond by talking about what they can and cannot see. These objectors hear about the reality of human sin and say, 'You preachers are always talking about sin, but I cannot see that man is so terrible.' They hear about the inability of man to save himself and say, 'It seems to me if a man does this or that, God will accept him.'

In raising these objections they essentially elevate themselves to God's level and suggest that their seeing is as good as his. And they fail to take into account that man cannot see the complete reality of his sin because he looks at himself with the eye of sin.

The supreme tragedy of those who fail to see the fact of human sin is that they cut themselves off from the cure for it. That cure is now presented to us by the prophet Isaiah.

What the Lord did (vv.16-17)

How very thankful we should be that this passage does not end on a note of unrelieved gloom! Thank God that there is a 'therefore' here (v. 16). When the Lord saw that there was no other way by which sinful people could be delivered from their sins, he himself stepped in to provide deliverance. When he saw that sinners could not save themselves, he provided for them a way of salvation. When all was helpless and hopeless, the Lord stepped in.

What a breathtaking description Isaiah gives us of the Lord's work of salvation! It is the description of a mighty warrior.

His arm

The prophet first says of the Lord, 'His own arm brought salvation for him' (v. 16). Albert Barnes says, 'The idea is, that salvation was to be traced to God alone. It did not originate with man, and it was not accomplished by his agency or help.'

His righteousness

Isaiah then says of the Lord, 'His own righteousness, it sustained him' (v. 16). Barnes interprets this phrase as follows: 'Sustained by the consciousness that he was doing right, he went forward against all opposition, and executed his plan.'

His breastplate

The picture of the Lord as a warrior becomes even clearer with the next phrase: 'He put on righteousness as a breastplate' (v. 17). The breastplate was designed to protect the chest area. When the Lord Jesus Christ came to this earth to do the work of salvation, he was tempted by Satan; but he, the Lord Jesus, would not sin because he was covered in righteousness.

His helmet

Isaiah also says the Lord put on 'a helmet of salvation on his head' (v. 17). We can say that the Lord Jesus came to this earth and went about his ministry with the work of salvation constantly on his mind. He never lost sight of why he had come. When Satan sought to divert the Lord Jesus from this work, our Lord's helmet of salvation protected him.

His garments

The prophet further says the Lord 'put on the garments of vengeance' (v. 17). This means the Lord Jesus came to take vengeance on his foes. Yes, there are fierce and fearsome foes who have arrayed themselves against God and his plans. The evil one, Satan, is the greatest of these foes, but he is not alone. He heads up and presides over a kingdom of evil beings that are vehemently opposed to God. (Eph. 6:12).

Satan succeeded in bringing sin into this world and sin has brought terrible heartache and havoc. The Lord God is not ambivalent about sin and all the harm it has done. He is angry about sin and angry at Satan, and his redeeming work was designed as an act of just vengeance against Satan (Col. 2:15).

His zeal

Finally, Isaiah says the Lord 'was clad with zeal as a cloak' (v. 17). This means the Lord did not go reluctantly about the work of salvation. He did it with zeal, that is, wholeheartedly and fervently.

That zeal took him all the way to a Roman cross outside Jerusalem where he stood in the place of sinners and received the wrath of God that was due to them. We know what it is to have faltering and flagging zeal. We are zealous for a while only to give way to half-heartedness. We should rejoice that our Lord did not go about the work of salvation in the same fashion as we go about the work of serving him. We are saved because of his unfailing zeal on our behalf.

It is again interesting that all the phrases used by the prophet to describe the Lord undertaking the great work of salvation are in the past tense. How could Isaiah, centuries before the Lord Jesus Christ came, speak of this work as having already been accomplished? The answer is that God was so completely devoted to this work and so very capable of performing it that Isaiah could speak of it as already having taken place.

The words of Isaiah must have provided tremendous comfort for the captives in Babylon. They knew their captivity was due to their sinfulness. But as they read Isaiah's words they had to realize that their sin, great as it was, was not greater than God's grace.

My sin--oh, the bliss of this glorious tho't:
My sin not in part, but the whole
Is nail'd to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul.
Horatio G. Spafford, 'It is Well with
my Soul'

QUOTES FROM ROGER ELLSWORTH

- "The piercing question, then, is how to get on the right side of Christ in this life. The answer is clear. The same grace that worked in the life of Jacob works today. Through that grace, and that grace alone,

we can, as Jacob himself did, become utterly ashamed of our sinfulness, repent of it, and cast ourselves entirely upon the Lord Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour.¹

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- "Today's choices are tomorrow's consequences." ²
- "Are you today, child of God, where you ought to be? Or are you in the wrong place? Are you spending a lot of time with people who have no regard for the laws of God and who are likely to bring you harm? Are you going to places where temptation so abounds that it is almost impossible to resist it? Have you, child of God, strayed far from the Lord? Have you been living at Shechem, the place of broken vows, broken hearts and broken lives? No matter how far you have strayed, there is forgiveness with the Lord. Turn from your sin and seek him today."³
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- "While God does not delight in our suffering, his purpose is not just to make life in this world easy for us. It is rather to further his plan of redemption. That plan involves saving us from sin and increasingly conforming us to the image of Christ (Rom.8:29). This purpose requires God to govern things in an entirely different way than he would if his purpose were to make life comfortable."⁴
- "While we are becoming more and more casual about God's commandments, God himself has not changed. He still places a premium on obedience (1 Sam.15:22; Luke 6:46) and assures us that we will eventually give account to him for every act of disobedience (Rom. 14:12).⁵
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- "God always has bigger fish to fry than meets the eye."⁶
- "In the light of this, we can conclude that the headship of the man doesn't mean that the woman is inferior to the man. The woman's submission is to be like Christ's: a voluntary subordination of an equal in order to ensure the smooth functioning of church and home." (Strengthening Christ's Church, P. 180)

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- "You must not draw your conclusion about God's love for you by looking at your circumstances. You draw your conclusion about God's love for you by looking at the cross."
- "Isn't it ironic that we often use our circumstances as an excuse for not obeying God when God is the one who gave us those very circumstances so we could obey him?....If anyone says such and such a circumstance in our life is a shame, we can confidently say with Paul that every circumstance is from God's will, for God's service and with God's presence!"⁸

What You Could Do

1. Use Roger Ellsworth's books for your personal devotions, seeking to make direct application to how you think, what you believe, and how you act.
2. Use Roger Ellsworth's books for group Bible study, dividing the chapters into reachable segments for each lesson.
3. Some of his books have been translated into other languages by Evangelical Press. You could mail these to missionaries or pastors or schools in countries where little reformed literature is available.
4. You could train yourself to recognize the difference between old-fashioned experiential preaching and the newer preaching style with experience stories and psychological helps for a successful life.
5. You could attend and support experiential preaching in this Puritan, Reformed tradition whether it is exciting or great oratory or not (and even if the music is not your favorite style)!

6. If you have the desire to teach, you could follow Roger Ellsworth's example and hone your own teaching skills through immersing yourself into the works of an experiential preacher like he did with Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

7. Invite Roger Ellsworth to preach. See a live, warm-hearted Calvinist! (www.rogerellsworth.com)