

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 39

ISAIAH – Part One

I. BACKGROUND

Who was Isaiah?

Isaiah was a Jewish Prophet who prophesied during the reign of Hezekiah in Judah. He is identified as “Isaiah Ben Amoz,” which means Isaiah son of Amoz.

The time period of Isaiah’s prophetic ministry stretched from 740 B.C. (the year King Uzziah died–Isaiah 6:1) through at least 681 B.C. (Isaiah 37:38 reference). This prophetic ministry was active during certain key events in the reign of Hezekiah (*see* 2 Kings 18:13 – 20:19). This was the time of Judah’s Assyrian crisis.

Assyria was the world power from the northeast that was seeking to exercise dominion over Israel, Judah and others. In the 730’s, Israel and Aram tried to persuade Judah to join in a fight to stop the Assyrian expansion. Judah’s king at the time was Ahaz. Rather than joining against Assyria, Ahaz made the decision to ask for Assyrian help against Israel and Aram. Assyria then came in and conquered Israel around 722/721 B.C.

Some 20 years later, Judah’s king, Hezekiah, decided to stop paying tribute to the Assyrian king (now Sennacherib). Sennacherib then came and destroyed much of the Judean countryside and laid siege to Jerusalem for two years. As Hezekiah sweated out the situation, it was Isaiah that brought the prophesy of God’s promised deliverance. A journey back into the lessons from Kings in this class will refresh much of these details.

Did Isaiah write the book “Isaiah?”

The book Isaiah clearly delivers the prophesies of the prophet Isaiah, regardless of who actually recorded them. Since the early 1800’s, many modern scholars have cast doubt on whether one individual compiled the entire book of Isaiah. Many scholars believe that a second individual (or even a third) actually wrote chapters 41–66. Often, these scholars espouse their positions with a certain arrogance as to any who might disagree. These scholars consider any that hold to a unified Isaiah (*i.e.*, all 66

chapters being actual words of the prophet) to be biblical light-weights of a naïve or ignorant perspective.

Arrogance aside, there are in fact very good arguments for a unified Isaiah. The arguments include literary usage, repeated phrases and themes found throughout the book, the records of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other evidence. Those wishing to pursue these arguments further are invited to read R. K. Harrison's Introduction to the Old Testament.

II. TEXT

A. The actual text of Isaiah can be divided into multiple sections. The first half can be seen as chapters 1-33. These chapters cover Prophecies about the ruin and restoration of Judah (1-5); the call of Isaiah and biographical material (6-8); the world empires and their roles in God's plans (9-12); prophecies regarding foreign nations (13-23); universal judgment and the deliverance of Israel (24-27); the moral indictment of the chosen people (28-31); and the restoration of the Davidic regime (32-33).

The second half (34-66) can be divided into multiple sections also: the judgment upon Edom and the restoration of the ransomed (34-35); Biographical material from the time of Hezekiah (36-39); Prophetic assurances of comfort (40), deliverance (41-44) and divine judgment (45); pronouncements against Babylon (46-48); redemption through the work of the Servant (49-55); ethical pronouncements (56-59); and life in the restored Zion (60-66).

B. The first section deals mainly with the Assyrian crisis and judgment, while a good bit of the second section deals with the Babylonian captivity and the comfort of Israel's restoration.

C. The text of Isaiah presents a number of themes which are paramount to Biblical Theology. As such, the prophecies see significant fulfillment in the events explained in the New Testament. Isaiah itself is quoted frequently throughout the New Testament.

D. The themes within Isaiah include that of the suffering servant, God's judgment and wrath with a following redemption, and the Holiness of God. Multiple passages deal with these themes and should be looked at in some detail. We will look at two themes this week and several more next week.

1. Isaiah 40:3-5

Isaiah 40 concerns the comfort God calls out for his people after the time of captivity has ended. Verse 1 and 2 has God saying that Israel is to be comforted and spoken to tenderly, because she (Israel) has been fully punished for her sins. The first voice that offers the tender comfort of the Lord speaks in verses 3–5. The voice says:

³A voice of one calling: In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

There are several things we need to note in these verses. First, all four gospel writers reference this voice in verse 3 as John the Baptist. Matthew explains that as John the Baptist was preaching that people should repent because the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand, John was “he who was spoken of through the Prophet Isaiah” with a quotation then from Isaiah 40:3 (Mt 3:3). This story linked to Isaiah is also recounted in Mark 1:3. Luke references the story and prophetic link as well, but adds more of the Isaiah passage (4 and most of 5).

John’s gospel gives us a little more understanding. John records that people were actually approaching John the Baptist and asking him whether he was Elijah or the expected prophet. When John replied “neither,” the follow-up question was “then who exactly are you?” To this question, John himself replied that he was “the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘make straight the way of the Lord.’” So, we see here that the voice crying in the wilderness in preparation is John the Baptist.

The next point to be considered is as John was preparing the way, what exactly was he preparing the way for? What was following him? What was coming? We know from the New Testament that the answer is Jesus the Messiah. But, what is it that Isaiah prophesied on this point? Isaiah says, “the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it.” What does this say about Jesus?

We must not look at this in a vacuum. These are very loaded terms in “Bible-speak.” Remember the story recorded in Exodus 33. Moses is alone with God on Mount Sinai, and Moses asks of God in verse 18, “Now show me your glory.” God explains that even holy Moses is not to look on God’s face because “no one may see me and live” (33:20). So, the Lord puts Moses in the cleft of a rock and covers Moses with God’s hand when God’s “glory passes by.” We are then told in Exodus 34 that Moses’ very face was radiant when he later descended the mountain in spite of the fact that Moses never beheld the actual glory of the Lord.

Writing of Jesus, John explains in John 1:14 that “the word (Jesus) became flesh and made his dwelling among us, we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the father full of grace and truth.”

Now, let’s put the Isaiah prophesy into a fuller perspective. As God’s people are reeling from the harsh results of sin, they are comforted by Him whose way has been prepared. All needed preparations are made and comfort comes to God’s people as we behold Jesus, the glory of God himself. Then we, like Moses, shine with reflections of his radiance.

However, we go further, for indeed, Moses did not have the ability to see God in his glory and live. Moses saw the mere passing of God and that alone caused his face to shine, albeit not permanently. We, on the other hand, actually behold the face of God, the glory of the almighty in his son, Jesus, and our countenance will never be the same! As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

2. Isaiah 54

This chapter again recounts the theme of God’s comfort following times of hurt and shame that followed Israel’s callous and blatant sin.

The chapter begins with God’s call to “Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy...you will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood...For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back...with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you...Though the mountains be shaken, and the

hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken” (54:1-10). In fact, the children of the barren woman are to eventually outnumber those of the fertile! (verse 1)

Again, let us note several parts of this passage before we venture a full picture. The passage itself speaks of God’s ultimate covenant kindness and compassion (Hebrew *chesed*) toward his children. The pains and travails that result from our sin will not permanently remove God’s people from his promises. The earth itself may fall apart, but God will stay faithful because of God’s character and commitment.

This passage goes further, however, in a way that illustrates the unusual nature of some prophetic words. Paul uses this passage in Galatians 4 to make a point about the church (the “children of Abraham by faith” rather than by genetics)!

Paul starts by reminding the Galatians of the Genesis account that Abraham bore children through two women, Hagar and Sarah. Sarah herself was barren, causing Abraham to seek out children through Hagar, Sarah’s maidservant. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael; later, Sarah gave birth to Isaac. Ishmael mocked/ persecuted Isaac, causing Abraham to send away both Hagar and Ishmael.

Paul then makes a pretty typical first century rabbinic argument. Paul analogizes fertile Hagar and her son Ishmael to the law given Moses on Sinai. Paul recognizes that Sarah was barren and her ultimate son Isaac was born because of the intervention of the Spirit of God. Paul analogizes this situation to those children of Abraham who are born into God’s family spiritually as opposed to genetic Jews. We who are children of promise / Spirit have freedom from the bondage of the law.

Paul quotes the Isaiah passage in the process of making this argument relating that the barren woman (Sarah) should break into a song of joy because her children will outnumber those of the fertile (Gal. 4:26).

Paul’s Galatians passage presents a valid and accurate understanding of the Isaiah passage, but I would suggest that it is not the only meaning of the Isaiah passage. Like so many Prophetic passages, this one has multiple levels it offers for us to follow. First and foremost, it has the principle that God will never totally abandon his people. This principle applies to Israel by birth as well as to Israel of faith. God has covenant kindness that emanates from the very character of God. It

will bring forth life where there seems to only be barren death. In fact, it ultimately brings more life than is seen elsewhere.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

- A. Sin brings pain and destruction.
- B. Jesus brings healing and change.
- C. God says so.
- D. God proved so.
- E. God will redeem Israel.
- F. God will redeem his people.