

## Isaiah 2-5

### *A Backdrop of Darkness*

#### **Introduction**

Last week, we saw how Is. 1:1-2:5 forms a microcosm, or miniature of the whole book of Isaiah. This week we are going to look at Isaiah 2-5 and see how they, along with chapter 1, work together to form a backdrop of darkness as the book of Isaiah begins. The arrangement of this material reminds me a bit of how many movies today start with an opening of an intense action scene from later in the movie that ends with a dramatic cliff-hanger as the title shows and the movie rewinds back to the beginning of the story. Something very similar happens in these opening five chapters.

There are visions of hope woven throughout these chapters, yes, but, if you look at chapter 5, the end of this section is very grim. Darkness seems to have the last word. This section closes with an ominous cliff-hanger.

The question that should be hanging in your mind at the end of these chapters is, “**How are the promises of God going to come true? How can light come out of this darkness?**”

That is a question that the book of Isaiah will begin to answer in chapter 6, which we will look at next week, but, today, we are going to look again at these introductory chapters.

#### **Commentary on 1-5**

##### **Chapter 1**

- Chapter one, which we covered last week, is basically a “state of the union” address in which the Lord thoroughly condemns what his people, his children, have become. Their society is corrupt and wicked, and, because of this, their worship has become empty and worthless—vain actions without any heart behind them.
- Yet, even in the midst of the scathing words of this chapter, we saw that the Lord has not abandoned (9) and will not abandon (25-28) his people.
- He invites them to come back to him (18) and promises that the unfaithful city will once again become the faithful city (26).

##### **Chapters 2-4**

- Isaiah 2-4 forms the next section of these opening chapters and opens with a thrilling vision of a new, restored, Jerusalem (the faithful city) that is a rallying-point for the whole world, the city of universal truth and peace, established and elevated on the highest mountain, as seen in 2:2-4 (last week as well).
- Far removed from this vision, however, the text dives right back down to the depravity of the people and the judgment that will come to them starting again in 2:6 and going all the way to 4:1.
- I want to take a minute first though, before we continue, to talk about the chapter and stanza divisions that you may see in your Bible, depending on your translation.
  - As Caleb and I have pointed out many times, the chapter and verse divisions are not inspired and were not original to the text but were established by tradition. They are very helpful for locating a specific text, but they can actually be unhelpful at times when trying to see the flow of the text.
  - For books like Isaiah that contain a lot of poetry and other literary features, there are further layers of divisions beyond chapters and verses seen in not just paragraphs but also stanzas.
  - There are traditions behind these divisions as well, but they were even more varied, and, unlike chapter and verse divisions which have been formalized and almost universally accepted, you will see a good amount of variety between different translations for these further divisions.

- The reason that I bring this up here is that you will see some variety in how different translations break up the stanzas in chapter 2-4, and I would argue that 2:22 should be 3:1 and 4:1 should probably also be included in chapter 3, as some translations indicate by how they divide up the stanzas of these chapters.
  - Different translations will also have 2:5 and 2:22 either with the stanza of the previous verses or with the stanza of the following verses or even separated out on their own as their own stanza.
  - Around these verses, you will also see different translations put their headings in different spots. So what is going on??
- The best explanation I saw about what is going on in these chapters is that you have the heading in 2:1.
  - Then you have the vision of the restored, elevated Jerusalem in 2:2-4.
    - Then in 2:5-2:21, you have a call to the people to walk in the light of the Lord in 2:5 followed by condemnation and judgment for their idolatry in 2:6-21.
    - After this, in 2:22-4:1 you have a call for the people to stop finding their security in man in 2:22 followed by condemnation and judgment for finding security in political and military power, in possessions and pleasure in 3:1-4:1. The people are condemned and promised judgment for their pride, arrogance, rebellion, and sin.
  - In 4:2-6, you have another vision of a restored and purified Jerusalem where God will once again dwell with his people to an even greater extent than he ever did before.
- Within these chapters, there are two themes of opposites that help us understand what is being said. The keys to these two themes are found at the very beginning and the very end of these chapters.
  - 2:2-21 - The Exalted & the Humbled - “Highest Mountain” (2:2)
    - First, I mentioned last week that the religions of the day depicted gods as living on sacred mountains and hills; so to say that the Lord’s mountain will be lifted up as the highest of the mountains (2:2) is another way of saying that he will be lifted up and seen as the highest, the only true God.
    - One of the main reasons I think this helps us to understand what is going on in the text is that this idea started in 2:2 is then picked up as a recurring theme in 2:6-21.
    - Again and again in these verses we read that the idols of man and what man idolizes will be brought low and pass away and the Lord alone will be exalted.
    - The pride of mankind that leads to idolatry in any number of things that we ourselves create as we seek to give ourselves security, pleasure, power, and purpose will be brought low, and God, the Creator of all, will be seen as the only one worthy of worship.
    - The irony is made explicit in 2:8-9. We lower ourselves by worshiping things that we made with our own hands. We lower ourselves below the creation rather than worshiping the Creator.
  - 2:22-4:6 - Rejection & Marriage - “Canopy/Marriage Chamber” (4:5)
    - Just as 2:2-21 has a theme of opposites (exalted/brought low), so also 2:22-4:6 has a theme of opposites as well: rejection and marriage..
    - 2:22 calls the people to not put their trust in man, “in whose nostril is breath.” In other words, stop putting your trust in created beings whose very breath is a gift from God.
    - 3:1-4:1 then contains a series of poems and a court scene that boil down to God taking away, rejecting and judging, the leadership of the city, both male and female.
    - 3:8-15 sits at the center of this section and gives the reasoning for God’s verdict and declares that he has entered into judgment.

- Surrounding this center, you have 3:1-7, which addresses the leading men and says that the leaders will be taken away and those who are left will become desperate for any sort of leadership, but they will fall into corruption and chaos.
- On the other side, you have 3:16-4:1, which addresses the prominent women and says that their symbols and possessions of prominence, power, and security will be taken away, and they will become desperate for one man to marry many of them (a societal norm that was a social safety net in times of hardship, as men were the providers in the society of the time).
- In 3:6, we read “a man will take hold of his brother,” and in 4:1 we read “seven women will take hold of one man.” These are purposefully parallel accounts of desperation.
- Finally, 4:1 transitions into 4:2-6 with the idea of marriage and provision, the other side of the opposites in these verses.
- The marriage of desperation and no provision in 4:1 is turned into a beautiful picture of provision and marriage in 4:2-6 that could be an entire sermon in itself with all the imagery these five short verses contain.
- To summarize:
  - Verse 2 says that the “branch/shoot” of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious and there will be abundant provision for all. Remember all the strong trees the people were relying on in the previous chapters? It will be just a shoot that will become what the people actually needed.
  - Verses 3-4 say that those who are left in the holy city will themselves be holy after the cleansing judgment of God, a cleansing spirit of judgment and fire.
  - Verses 5-6 then say there will be a cloud by day and fire by night over all who are in this holy city (remember the cloud by day/fire by night in the wilderness that was only in the center of the camp, separated from the people by a courtyard?). Over all, there will be a canopy, or “bridal chamber” as they enter into eternal union with God, and, over all, there will be a booth for shade and for refuge.
    - “Booth” sounds underwhelming, maybe, but the word is the same word used almost exclusively for the Feast of Booths, the feast that celebrated the gathering of the harvest and God’s provision and protection and he brought his people into the Promised Land.
- Rejection has somehow become Marriage.
  - Notice how the drumbeat of “in that day” repeated three times in 3:18, 4:1, and 4:2 develops from judgment into cleansing and marriage, union between God and his purified people.
  - Judgment is not the end of the story.

## Chapter 5

- Isaiah 5:1–30 closes the opening chapters with a parable of a vineyard in 1-7 that is then explained in 8-30 through a pattern of woes, consequences, woes, consequences.
  - 5:1-7 describes how God did all the work for his vineyard and, rightfully, should have expected good grapes, but he received only inedible, useless grapes that are described in the series of woes in the chapter.
  - In 1:8, the vineyard was a reference to God’s preservation of a remnant. In 3:15, when his vineyard was threatened and devoured by wicked rulers, he stepped in his judgment to protect it. But here, in 5:1-7, he asks “What more can I do?”

- In verse 4, we read that the Lord had so spent himself for the good of his vineyard that there was nothing more he could have done.
- He received the opposite of what he should rightfully expect. This is beautifully shown in the wordplay at the end of verse 7. The words justice/bloodshed and righteousness/outcry sound very similar but mean the opposite.
  - He looked for justice, or correcting wrongs, and found only bloodshed, or wrongdoing.
  - He looked for righteousness, or what is right, and found only the outcry of those who had been wronged.
- He, therefore, vows to destroy the vineyard, as spelled out in 13-17 and 24-30.
- Note how chapter 5 begins with the promise of a love song (1) but ends with darkness (30), and that between those two points, unlike 1:2–31 and 2:2–4:6, there is no message of hope.
- For if all has already been done, what more can the Lord do?
- As far as chapter 5 is concerned, darkness has the last word. The shutters have come down on the Lord's people. The Lord raises his signal for nations far away to come and devour the land, and all ends in darkness.
- This is the heart-stopping truth on which Isaiah ends his preface, the conclusion out of which his call to ministry and his prophecies emerge.

### **Summary & Application of Chapters 1-5**

#### **Summary**

- These chapters form a backdrop of darkness to the call and ministry of Isaiah.. They tell of the coming exile and describe in sometimes graphic detail what is going to happen.
- They also tell of why it happened: the people rejected their God who had lovingly chosen them and cared for them. They were his vineyard that he had lovingly tended and protected.
- These chapters give a poetic summary and justification of what we are about to see played out through the events of chapter 7-39 and the promised exile.
- They also, however, contain visions of restoration and hope that we will see played out in chapter 40-66.
- The content is beautifully arranged to dramatically present this message and prepare the reader for what is going to follow:
  - 1:1-31 - Judgment & Darkness, but with hope
    - 2:1-4 - Future Restoration & Glory
      - 2:5-4:1 - Judgment & Darkness, no hope
    - 4:2-6 - Future Restoration & Glory
  - 5:1-30 - Judgment & Darkness, no hope?

#### **Application**

- What is interesting about this arrangement is that it seems, based on both the chiasm and how the section ends, that judgment and darkness seem to have the last word.
  - The center of the chiasm is usually the main point, and there is no hope in the center.
  - The end of this section transitions us into the content of the book, and there is no hope at this transition.
  - Yet, nestled in this darkness, when all hope seems lost, we are given 2 almost jolting, bright lights of hope and restoration.
    - Especially in terms of verse count, you essentially have large sections of darkness and judgment with small but bright sections of restoration and hope
  - Hidden in the darkness, but somehow shining through it, we have hope.

- Somehow, judgment is transformed into hope–salvation, restoration, and glory–for those who place their trust in God.
- When all hope seems lost, even though his people have abandoned him, God will not abandon his people. He will make a way of restoration. He will purify and glorify.
- I think that the arrangement of these introductory chapters is entirely on purpose to make the point that, even when all seems dark and there is no hope, the plans and purposes of God cannot be thwarted. He is worthy of our trust.
- Even if faithfulness to God does not change our circumstances (even those who were faithful were still part of those who were exiled), faithfulness to God and trust in him will one day be rewarded with a future in glory with him and is rewarded even now in his presence and comfort in our circumstances.
- The Lord of Hosts, the Lord of Armies, will have the final victory.
- And not just the final victory, for throughout this book we will see how God uses judgment and even the plans of the enemy to accomplish his purposes.
- From beginning to end, we will see throughout the book of Isaiah that God’s light cannot be extinguished by the darkness.
- One last thing we see here and throughout the book is that God’s people are those who not only say they believe but also show it by living a life that shares the heart of God (James 2).
  - In his condemnation of the people in chapter 5, the word for “Woe/Alas” occurs six times–more than any other OT chapter.
  - In fact, the only other chapter of Scripture that has this many woes is Matthew 23, when Jesus gives his series of woes to the scribes and Pharisees....leaders of God’s people who were living contrary to the heart of God, oppressing the people, and rejecting God’s Truth, Who was literally standing right in front of them....hmm...that sounds a bit like Isaiah’s situation...
  - The leaders and people in Isaiah’s day and the Pharisees in Jesus’ day were doing all the right actions of worship, but they did not actually worship God with their hearts and lives.
  - They played the part of worshiping God while living in direct opposition and rebellion to him.
  - What is amazing, though, is that just as God calls those who practice empty worship to repent in Is. 1:18, to come to him and be cleansed of their sins; so, we read immediately after the woes to the Pharisees in Matt. 23 that Jesus longs to gather those in Jerusalem to himself.
  - “Woe” is a word of judgment, yes, but it is also a call to repentance!
  - The same God who is our Judge also longs to be our Savior.
  - If you don’t know him, he says, “Come.”
  - If you do know him but have maybe not been living like it and are maybe ashamed of what you have done and think he wants nothing to do with you right now. To you, he still says the same thing, “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” (1:18)
  - He is the God who longs to turn “Woe” into “Welcome Home.”