

Isaiah 1:1-2:5

Introduction & Summary

Introduction to Series

Today, we begin a new series through the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is 66 chapters, but this series will only go until Easter; so, yes, we will be covering a lot of ground very fast. As I have studied this book, though, I feel that, especially for the first time we go through this book as a church, it is best to do more of a survey so that we can see how all the parts of the book fit together and make sure that we are understanding each part in context. Isaiah also contains a lot of poetry, oracles, woes, chiasms, and other literary features that are most clearly understood when seen as a whole.

Many of us are likely very familiar with many verses or chapters from Isaiah, such as chapter 53 and the Suffering Servant, or, especially this month, 9:6 (“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”), or 7:14 and the prophecy of the virgin birth, or 40:31 (“but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”), or 1:18 (“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.”), or 26:3 (“You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.”).

I could go on, but I think you get the point. Isaiah is a masterpiece. It has some of the most well-known, most beautiful, most witty, most encouraging, and most scathing rhetoric in the Bible. Isaiah has been called the Shakespeare of the Prophets and the St. Paul of the Old Testament. It is quoted more than any other OT book by the NT authors and has been called a mini Bible by many due to arrangement of its material and how the first 39 and last 27 chapters have some similarities to the 39 books of the OT and the 27 books of the NT (though the chapter divisions were added later and the order of the 66 books is not inspired).

My goal for these next few months is to humbly offer a taste of the majesty of this book and help us to better understand the pieces that many of us know so well and how they fit into the book as a whole. There is much that I, sadly, will not have time for, but I am confident that even a survey of this book will prove to be an encouragement and a challenge and cause us to adore and worship our glorious God whom Isaiah’s masterful writing puts on full display for the world to see and worship.

Background Information

Before we begin working through the book, a little background information is going to be helpful. First, who is Isaiah? Honestly, we are not given many details about him here or elsewhere in the Bible. We do not read of his call to ministry until chapter 6, but we will see why this is the case later. His father was Amoz, of whom the Bible says nothing, but Jewish tradition claims Amoz was the brother of Amaziah, king of Judah, which would put Isaiah in the royal line, but this is not certain. From chapters 7-8, we know that Isaiah was a husband and father who likely lived in Jerusalem. 2 Chron. 26:22 indicates that Isaiah also wrote a historical book about King Uzziah. This work is now lost, but the fact that we know he wrote it tells us he was in a position to know enough about the king to write it. Lastly, Hebrews 11:37, when it mentions that some martyrs were “sawn in two,” may allude to the Jewish tradition of Isaiah’s death by being sawn in half under the persecution of king Manasseh of Judah.

When did Isaiah minister? I was looking at Caleb’s historical timeline he made for his series on Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah, and the book of Isaiah actually fits right before and at the beginning of his timeline. The events of Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah took place during the Persian Empire roughly from 540-420 BC, so he

focused mostly on that empire and the Babylonian Empire, which was immediately before the Persian Empire. The Babylonians had conquered Judah and deported many of its citizens, with the first deportation happening in 605 BC. Then Cyrus of Persia declared in 539 that the exiles could return, and Caleb's series focused on the events around this time (540-420). Isaiah lived and prophesied during the empire before the Babylonian Empire: the Assyrian Empire, which was dominant from about 744-612 BC and conquered the northern 10 tribes of Israel.

As we see in 1:1, Isaiah's ministry spanned the reigns of four kings of Judah during the Assyrian Empire: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Chapter 6:1 tells us that his call to ministry came in the year that King Uzziah died, which was around 740 BC. The death of Uzziah (who is called Azariah in 2 Kings) marks an end to a period of Judaeen power and prosperity. At this time, the long-weakened Assyrian Empire begins to re-emerge as a superpower with Tiglath-Pileser III and his campaigns as he seeks to extend his empire. Around this time, he took the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh into exile, as we read in 1 Chron. 5:26. So, the beginning of Isaiah's ministry comes at a turning point in history as a warning is given to Judah through what is happening to the northern tribes as a result of their rebellion against God.

It also comes at a spiritual turning point as well. We read in 2 Kings 15 and 2 Chronicles 26 that Uzziah reigned for 52 years and did what was right in God's sight, but he didn't take the high places down where the people were making improper offerings. In 2 Chron. 26, we read of Uzziah that "when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the Lord his God." He tried to burn incense on the altar of incense, though he was not a priest. He was struck with a skin disease for this rebellion and had to live in isolation for the last few years of his life, with his son Jotham co-ruling with him.

After the death of Uzziah, Jotham ruled for only a few years on his own. We are told in 2 Kings 15 and 2 Chron. 27 that he also did what was right in God's sight for the most part, but he also did not take down the high places, and the people continued to give improper offerings and follow corrupt practices.

This paves the way for his son, Ahaz, to take the people even further into rebellion and corruption. We read in 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chron. 28 that Ahaz did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and walked in the ways of the kings of Israel (the northern tribes), even as they were facing judgment from God. He made images of Baal and false offerings, he used fortune-telling, omens, sorcery, and mediums, and burned his sons as an offering, following the worst of practices like the kings of the other nations. It is to Ahaz that many of Isaiah's prophecies are given to warn him where this path will lead the nation and to warn him against making foolish allegiances.

For, during this time, Israel, Syria, Judah, and many other surrounding nations were vassal states of the Assyrian empire. Many of the events we read throughout the book of Isaiah refer to various alliances or attempted alliances and attempts to throw off Assyrian rule, during both the time of Ahaz and of his son, Hezekiah. These rarely ended well for anyone opposing the Assyrian Empire.

We read in 2 Kings 18-20 and 2 Chron. 29-32 that Hezekiah did what was right in the sight of the Lord and led many spiritual reforms in Judah, but, just like Uzziah, he also became prideful near the end of his life, as we will see in chapters 37-39. During Hezekiah's time, the nation of Israel was conquered after being besieged for 3 years (He co-reigned with Ahaz at this time). About 20 years after this, Hezekiah attempted to throw off Assyrian rule of Judah, but he escaped destruction and deportation only through the direct help of God. We read in chapter 39 that this is but a delay of the inevitable due to the rebellion of Judah and its leaders.

The deportation and exile happen after Isaiah's lifetime, but chapters 40-66 look ahead to what God has told him and shown him is coming, and he pleads with the people to trust God for restoration.

The order of these events is not always obvious as you read through Isaiah, as most of the book can only be dated in general terms because no identifiers are given. As we work through the book, we will also see that

the content is not always in chronological order but rather arranged according to what Isaiah is seeking to accomplish with his message.

Outline

1-5 - The Situation (The Preface): the failure of Judah and the forfeiture of the promises?

6-39 - The Promise (The King): the failure of the Davidic king and the promise of the true David

40-55 - The Answer (The Servant): the sin of the people born by the sin-bearing Servant

56-66 - The End (The Conqueror): the call to live in obedience and righteousness while waiting for the final victory

Commentary on 1:1-2:5 (Microcosm of Isaiah)

Today, we will be looking at chapter 1:1-2:5, which is part of the first section, or preface, of the book that we see in chapters 1-5, but 1:1-2:5 also serves as a microcosm, or summary, of the whole book.

- 1:1 - Title
 - We have already talked about who Isaiah is and the different kings, so I won't say anything more about the names here.
 - We see a similar heading in 2:1, but neither 1:1 or 2:1 gives a definite date to tell us when these were spoken or written. In all the verses of chapter 1-5, in fact, only one foreign nation is mentioned, the Philistines, and they are only mentioned as an illustration.
 - It seems best to understand that all of the content of chapters 1-5 that is included under both headings is meant to be one large summary or backdrop to the ministry of Isaiah.
 - In his time, he sees the corruption and wickedness of Ahaz, he sees the prideful rebellion of even the good kings Uzziah and Hezekiah, and he sees the people and rulers continuing to sin, rebel, and place their trust in things other than God.
 - And, if the Jewish tradition is correct, he was martyred by the king after Hezekiah.
- 1:2-31 - "The State of the Union"
 - To start this five-chapter backdrop, 1:2 through the end of the chapter is what might be compared to a "State of the Union" speech.
 - Here in America, the State of the Union speech is "an opportunity for the president to review the past year's accomplishments and preview his agenda for the coming year."
 - Instead of the President, though, it is the Lord who is giving the speech, and the state of the "union" is not good.
 - The speech can be broken up generally into three sections: the state of the nation in 2-9, the state of the religion in 10-20, and the state of the society in 21-31.
 - 1:2-9 - The State of the Nation
 - In 2-4, God declares that his children, his people that he reared and brought up, his chosen people, have rebelled and become a sinful people, no longer children of his but children of evildoers. They have forsaken him, despised him, and become estranged to him (a reference to their choosing idols rather than him as their God).
 - In 5-9, he then describes the purpose of the various judgments they face, namely, to bring them to repentance, or at least to preserve a remnant who will repent.
 - He uses the language of war and desolation to talk about their judgment, but then, in verse 9, he says that the "Lord of Hosts" will preserve a remnant. They will not be utterly

destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah. An army will come in judgment, but the Lord of Armies will not abandon his people to total destruction.

- 1:10-20 - The State of the Religion
 - He then uses the language of Sodom and Gomorrah to roundly condemn the false spirituality of the people.
 - Verse 10 opens this section with, “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!”
 - Sodom and Gomorrah, words that symbolized complete rebellion against God fit for his judgment and destruction, are now used as titles for his own people.
 - In these verses, we see that the people are doing the habits of religion without the beliefs, actions, or love that these habits are to symbolize. To this God says, “Stop your offerings and your trampling of my courts until you are willing to listen to me and actually have the heart that what you are doing is supposed to represent.”
 - In 12-17 we find a message seen again in Jesus’ words in Matt. 5:23-24 & James’ words 1:26-27: leave your offering until your life is an offering.
 - The actions of worship themselves do not please God. We are told they are empty, worthless, an abomination, and a trampling in his courts if they are done with a heart that is not worshiping him.
 - To the people giving vain worship, he says, “Get out of my courts. Do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, and plead the widow’s case. That is the worship I want. A heart that is after my heart.”
 - But to these same people he also says, “Come, let us reason together. though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land.”
 - His favor and blessing is not found through empty worship; it is found through willing obedience and a humble heart.
- 1:21-31 - The State of the Society
 - Just as the imagery of Sodom and Gomorrah served as a transition from the first section to the section section, so the call to seek justice and correct oppression, to help the fatherless and the widows, serves as the transition from the second section to the third section.
 - The faithful city has become unfaithful. Righteousness used to dwell in this city, but now it is full of murderers, rebels, and thieves. The leaders and judges love bribes and gifts and do not help the fatherless and the widows but only those who can pay them.
 - In 24-26, we read that God will bring his hand of judgment against them, but, rather than the total destruction brought to mind by the Sodom and Gomorrah imagery of earlier, we see again that this judgment is ultimately for the purpose of refining and restoring them.
 - After judgment, they will again be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. The script will somehow be reversed and things will be restored through the judgment of God.
 - 27 says, “Zion shall be redeemed (ransomed) by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness.”
 - God’s standards, God’s justice and righteousness, will be upheld by how this ransom and restoration is accomplished.

Book Summary

The book of Isaiah, from beginning to end, addresses the problem of sin, showing the need for salvation and restoration. Isaiah is called by God to speak to the people of Judah and call attention to their wrongdoing and the judgment that will result if they continue on their path. But, from beginning to end, we see that judgment is not the end of the story; Isaiah also prophesies salvation, restoration, and a glorious future for those who place their trust in God. The message of Isaiah is ultimately about hope and trust in God. For the early Christians and still for today, this hopeful picture given by the masterful writing of Isaiah stirs our hearts and points us to the ultimate fulfillment of our hope found in Jesus.

In the book of Isaiah, the problem of sin is dealt with through judgment that brings purging and salvation to the remnant who believe. Judgment is not the end of the story. Restoration is. This is a foreshadowing of Jesus' work. He, our Redeemer, our Ransom (1:27), took God's judgment for our sin so that those who place their faith in his work for us may be purged and delivered from the power of sin and death. Judgment is not the end of the story. Restoration is. Jesus' ministry didn't end at the cross. He was resurrected and now sits at the right hand of the Father interceding for us. The book of Isaiah is 66 chapters pointing to this glorious truth of salvation and restoration possible for those who place their hope and trust in God.

The question asked again and again throughout the book is, "In whom do you trust?"

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 worshipping 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.”

Isaiah 6

Isaiah's Atonement & Commission

Introduction

Last week, we saw that chapters 1-5 provide a backdrop of darkness, if you will, to the book of Isaiah, or another way I mentioned that we can think about these chapters is that they are a dramatic movie opening that ends with an ominous cliffhanger before the title shows and we go back in time to the beginning of the story.

These chapters paint a bleak picture of the sin of the people during the time of Isaiah and give rationale for God's just punishment of exile. They contain short but bright pictures of a new, restored, and glorified Jerusalem, but the dark, violent content of chapter 5 that closes out the introduction leaves you wondering just how this future work of restoration and glory is going to be accomplished. God, as seen in chapter 5, had seemingly done all the work he could for his people, his vineyard, and yet they had produced the opposite of what he rightfully expected, and so they will go into exile, driven from his presence for their sin, destroyed for their arrogance and rebellion.

God says in 5:4, "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?"

As we go into chapter 6 today, imagine that the movie screen fades to black, the title, "Isaiah," comes on the screen, and, as we go back in time to Isaiah's call to ministry and a new scene begins, the questions hanging in the air that must be answered are:

Is exile the end of God's people and God's promises? What more can God do? How will the great visions of chapters 2 and 4 be fulfilled??

Commentary

6:1a - "In the year that King Uzziah died"

- As this new scene opens, we are immediately given the time stamp of "in the year that King Uzziah died." We might be tempted to skip this as just introductory material, but, as I mentioned in our first sermon on Isaiah, this time stamp is very important.
- Uzziah's death marked a turning point for Judah, both politically and spiritually.
- This time marks an end to a period of Judaeon power and prosperity. Uzziah had a long and prosperous reign of 52 years that had brought stability to Judah.
- Around the time of his death, though, the long-weakened Assyrian Empire begins to re-emerge as a superpower with Tiglath-Pileser III and his campaigns as he seeks to extend his empire, including taking three of the northern tribes into exile around this time.
- This time also marks a spiritual turning point for Judah. Uzziah was characterized by doing what was right, but, near the end of his life, he became arrogant and tried to burn incense in the temple, though he was not a priest. He was punished with a skin disease and remained isolated for his last few years, with his son Jotham co-ruling with him.
- Jotham ruled for only a few years after Uzziah and was also characterized by doing what was right, but his son, Ahaz, did what was evil and participated in all the idolatry and corrupt practices of the nations around him and led the people to do the same.

6:1b - The Lord, "High and Lifted Up"

- So, at a time when a foreign king is on the rise, Uzziah is dying, and the kings of Judah are declining into corruption, Isaiah receives a vision of "the Lord, sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up."
- Despite the darkness of this hour, the Lord is still sitting on his throne, high and lifted up over all.
- To understand better this vision that Isaiah has of the Lord on his throne, we need to remember something that I talked about last year in our Exodus series: the ark of the covenant was viewed to be the

Lord's footstool. It was not his throne, but rather simply where the Lord of heaven and earth, seated on his heavenly throne, chose to rest his feet here on earth.

- This is why the "train," or hem, of his robe fills the temple.
- The ark of the covenant, with its cherubim, or throne-guardian and throne-bearing angels, is similar to other ancient Near Eastern art of cherubim thrones, where the king or deity is shown sitting on a throne flanked by cherubim or similar beings. In contrast, though, Yahweh is so great that the cherubim throne is only his footstool, surrounded by the hem of His glory.

6:2 - The Seraphim

- Above this footstool and its cherubim we read of more angels, the seraphim, who are flying above God and praising him.
- In the name of these angels, seraphim, we actually have another reference to God's supremacy.
- The word "seraphim" is actually just a transliteration, or sounding out of the Hebrew word.
- Everywhere else in the Old Testament, including elsewhere in Isaiah, this word, or a form of it, is translated as a fiery and/or flying serpent. It is associated with the cobra, its "fiery" venom, and its "wings" or hood.
- The transliteration is to avoid putting snakes in the place of these angels. There is probably some merit to this, since we read of the seraphim having faces, feet, hands, voices, and 6 wings.
- But I think the snake connection is still on purpose because the cobra as a throne guardian is a well-known ancient near eastern image, especially in Egyptian theology, where a cobra was worn on the forehead of Pharaohs and kings as a symbol of protection. This cobra had its hood, or wings, flared and was ready to use its venom to protect the Pharaoh or deity.
- Instead of protecting Yahweh, though, the seraphim, whose six wings show their greater power and majesty than the throne guardians of other religions, need their wings to cover themselves from head to toe from Yahweh's consuming holiness; Yahweh, unlike the gods and Pharaohs of Egypt, does not need their protection.
- Isaiah, then, uses the seraphim to underscore the supreme holiness and might of God, who is "protected" by even mightier, more majestic guardians but doesn't actually need their protection.

6:3 - "Holy, holy, holy" and "Glory"

- The three-times repetition of "Holy" by these seraphim is yet another way to underscore God's supreme holiness. To repeat something 3 times is to say it is most of all. God is "Holiest of all."
- The next line is usually translated as "the whole earth is full of his glory," but it could also be translated as "may his glory fill the whole earth" and has that idea however you translate it.
- The glory of God is usually associated with his visible, earthly presence, like when the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle and later the temple. As the hem of his robe fills the temple in this vision, so the seraphim look ahead to when his glory will fill and be seen in all the earth, for this isn't wishful thinking; it is anticipation.
- Especially in light of the vision in chapter 4, with the glory cloud over all of Mount Zion and how the later chapters of this book will talk about his future, earthly reign, I think it is helpful to see this verse this way.
- Or, possibly, it is helpful to read this as "the whole earth is full [and will be full] of his glory!" This would be a reminder to Isaiah that God is King over all and that one day this would be made plain to all.
- Either way, with the rise of a foreign power and decline of Judah's kings, this proclamation would be an encouragement to Isaiah that God is the supreme King and that, one day, he will topple all earthly kingdoms and be seen as Lord of all. Assyria is nothing compared to him.

6:4 - “foundations of the thresholds shook...and the house was filled with smoke”

- With the cry of the seraphim and the presence of the Lord sitting on his throne above the temple, the foundations shake and the house/temple is filled with smoke. This is theophany (God appearance) language. This is Mount Sinai language, tabernacle language, and temple language.

6:5 - “Woe is me!”

- Also with the cry of the seraphim of “Holy, holy, holy” and the presence of the Lord on his throne, Isaiah cries “Woe is me! For I am lost.”
- The woes to the leaders and people in chapter 5 now turn on the prophet himself from his own lips. For, he says, “I am lost.” This word, “lost,” means “to be silenced, to cease to exist.”
- With the cries of “Holy, holy, holy” around him, Isaiah knows that he cannot join. He is silenced. He should not even be there. He is “a man of unclean lips...in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” He says his lips are unclean because he knows he is unclean. He has seen the Lord for who he is and realized that his greatest need is cleansing, forgiveness. The Lord is holy; he is not.
- That he mentions dwelling “in the midst of people with unclean lips” may seem random to us, but I think it is included for 2 reasons:
 - First, the culture of that day (and many cultures still today) have much more of a community-orientation than we are used to. In a very real sense, the sin of the community is the sin of the individual. So, Isaiah would feel the weight of his community’s sin in God’s presence.
 - Second, the seraphim had just spoken of their anticipation of God’s glory filling the earth. Isaiah realizes that not only must he be cleansed, but his people must be as well if they are to survive in the presence of such glory.

6:6-7 - Atonement

- In answer to this need for cleansing, one of the seraphim, certainly under the direction of the Lord, takes a burning coal from the altar and touches it to Isaiah’s mouth, saying, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”
- I wish I could say for certain which altar is being referred to, as there is really amazing symbolism that is happening either way, but the text doesn’t specify if this is the altar of sacrifice or the altar of incense, and commentators do a really good job arguing for either one
- To me, it seems like the evidence is weighted more toward the altar of incense, especially as it is used in Lev. 16 and Num. 16.
 - In Lev. 16, the burning coals & incense are held by the high priest as he enters the holy of holies to further cover him and protect him from the presence of the Lord that is already covered in cloud (similar to Isaiah being in the presence of the Lord and the house being filled with smoke).
 - In Num. 16, the burning coals and incense were used in an “emergency atonement” (like here), if you will, to protect them from the wrath of God after their complaining.
 - The lack of incense, which served in a way as a connection, or bridge, between God and the people, would be explained by the fact that Isaiah is already in God’s presence.
- Whether this is right or not, the bigger point being made is that God mercifully takes the initiative to provide a way for Isaiah to be cleansed. His guilt is taken away and his sin atoned for. Through the grace of God, he is declared clean and able to be in God’s presence, in relationship to him.

6:8 - “Whom shall I send?”

- Now that Isaiah is declared clean and able to stand in God’s presence, he hears a question, almost as if he has walked into the end of a meeting. He hears the voice of the Lord asking, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”

- The “us” here can seem odd, but the Lord speaking with a “council” if you will of heavenly beings is something that we see quite a few times in Scripture, actually.
- We talked a bit about this in my Sunday School class this spring, so I won’t belabor the point, but God often invites collaboration, feedback, and participation from both heavenly and earthly beings. In these “council” scenes, though, no other being, heavenly or earthly is ever said to be equal to God or ever to have the final say. God is God.
- In response to the Lord’s question, Isaiah enthusiastically volunteers.

6:9-13 - Commission

- The message he is given to say to the people, though, breaks his heart.
 - “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.”
- God continues, in verse 10, to tell Isaiah:
 - “Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”
- The message, Isaiah’s commission, is a declaration of judgment.
- At face value, especially as the ESV translates them, we might read these verses on their own and question God’s justice. Is God preventing the people from repenting?
- There are a couple things to consider that will help us answer this question.
- First, the whole point of the opening 5 chapters has been that God’s immanent judgment is completely just and reasonable in light of the rebellion, sin, and arrogance of the people.
 - In chapter 1, we read that the people, God’s children, have despised him, become laden with iniquity, and chosen to be the offspring/seed of evildoers rather than children of God (1:4). Their worship is empty and worthless, for their hearts are far from God, and their society is completely wicked and corrupt.
 - In chapters 2-3, we read that they have chosen to idolize and rely on just about anything except God. We read in 3:8-9, “their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence... they proclaim their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it.”
 - In chapter 5, we read that God, who had done everything imaginable for his vineyard, his people, found, not good grapes, but wild, useless, inedible grapes. In 5:18-19, we read, “Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, who draw sin as with cart ropes, who say: ‘Let him (God) be quick, let him speed his work that we may see it; let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw near, and let it come, that we may know it!’”
 - As the scoffers in 2 Peter 3:3-4, they mockingly call for the action and counsel of the Lord, daring the Lord to act as they draw in as much sin as they can, arrogantly assuming that he will not act in judgment.
 - To such a people, God’s judgment is just, and, if he chooses to harden their hearts as confirmation and a sealing of the fate that they have chosen, then he has the right to do so. We cannot know or judge ourselves when the rebellion of someone has reached the point of no return, but God has the *only* right to judge.
- Second, though, the words of Jesus and how people responded to him also help us to understand what these verses can mean.
 - This commission of Isaiah is quoted by or about Jesus in Mat. 13, Mk 4, Lk 8:9-10, and Jn 12.
 - In these passages, especially in Matt. 13, we see that, when Jesus spoke to the people in parables and the disciples asked why, he said,

Isaiah 7:1-9:7

The Coming King (Christmas Eve Sermon)

Introduction

Merry Christmas Eve, everyone! I purposefully timed our sermon series to cover a “Christmas” text today. We will be looking at Isaiah 7:1-9:7. This section is known as the “Immanuel” section and contains the prophecy of the virgin birth. This is one of the most well-known prophecies but also one of the most debated. I am not going to promise that I will answer all of your questions this morning, but I hope that I can help us see this prophecy in its original context and help us understand why Matthew saw its fulfillment in Mary and Jesus.

Commentary

7:1-2 - The Historical Situation

- Ahaz - Chapter 6 opened with the timestamp of “in the year that king Uzziah died.” Now, we read that we have jumped forward a few years to the reign of his grandson, Ahaz.
 - We know from the books of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles that Ahaz, unlike his father and grandfather, was characterized by doing what was evil in God’s sight. He committed idolatry and followed after the corrupt practices of the surrounding nations, just like the northern tribes of Israel and its leadership were doing.
 - One way that he did not follow them, though, was that he did not seek to resist and fight against the Assyrian Empire.
- Rezen (Syria) and Pekah (Israel) - Israel and Syria, Judah’s northern 2 neighbors, were seeking to take advantage of the fact that Assyria was currently occupied with problems elsewhere in the empire. They had formed an alliance and were seeking to force Judah into the alliance with them.
 - Assyria had already taken parts of Syria and Israel a few years earlier, and they were seeking to prevent any further loss through this alliance.
 - We know from 2 Kings 15-16 and 2 Chron. 28 that these two kings, separately, had begun to attack Judah during the end of Jotham’s reign (Ahaz’s father). They had already taken territories from Judah, killed many people, and taken many captives. Now, they had formed an alliance to attack the capital, Jerusalem, together.
- At this news, the heart of Ahaz and of his people “shook as the trees of the forest before the wind.”
 - Ahaz, though, is referred to as “the house of David,” and where we read “the heart of Ahaz,” the text says “his heart,” meaning “the heart of David’s house” shook. Why this language?
 - Chapter 6 had closed with the promise that Judah will be as a tree that is felled and burned, but the stump will remain, “the holy seed is its stump.”
 - The “holy seed” and stump imagery is a reminder of not just the remnant of holy people but also the Messiah who will come from the royal line of David.
 - Ahaz is the representative of that royal line, that tree, and he, the tree, is shaking.

7:3-9 - God’s First Message to Ahaz - Shear-jashub

- 3 - God sends Isaiah and his son to go meet with Ahaz and give him a message.
 - Isaiah’s son’s name means “a remnant will return:” both a promise of judgment and of hope. His son was likely named after the message that Isaiah was given in his vision recorded in chapter 6.
 - We are going to see a few different sons, by the way, whose names are prophecies.
 - We will also see that Ahaz is referred to multiple times as the representative of the house, or line, of David. The other rulers or attempted rulers of Judah or Israel are usually simply referred to as “the son of ___,” a way of reminding Ahaz that they are not of the line of David.

- Isaiah and his son meet Ahaz “at the end of the conduit of the upper pool” where Ahaz is likely inspecting the water supplies to Jerusalem in preparation for the coming siege.
- To this king, worried about surviving a siege and shaking with fear, God has Isaiah bring his son, whose very name contains the promise of God’s preservation of his people and the royal line, so that the son can serve as a visible sign for the messages that are about to follow.
- 4-6 - “Be careful, be quiet”
 - The first thing Isaiah is to say to Ahaz is “be careful, be quiet,” or, better translated, “be careful to be quiet.” This word, “quiet,” is usually associated with rest and peace that God provides, so this is another way of saying, “Be careful to trust God.”
 - I don’t think that this warning is really about water preparation, though. We know from 2 Kings 16 that Ahaz already had or was about to send messengers with silver and gold taken from the temple to bribe Assyria to help him.
 - He took silver and gold from God’s temple to bribe the ruler of Assyria to help him. This was basically a cultural way of saying, “I trust you and your gods more than my God.”
 - There is also great irony in this choice because Ahaz is basically bribing Assyria to do what they were planning to do anyway, which was to squelch the rebellions in this area.
 - He is also placing his trust in an empire that has already shown its desire to continue to increase its territory, placing his trust, in other words, in an empire sure to turn on him eventually.
 - So, after telling Ahaz to trust God rather than Assyria, he then tells him to not be afraid of the fierce anger of Rezin and the son of Remaliah because they are but two smoldering stick ends, just angry little stubs, which is another play on the tree language that has been happening: the tree of David is shaking because of 2 little smoldering stubs.
 - Rezin and Pekah are planning to invade Judah and replace Ahaz with a ruler who will join their alliance. It is not certain who “the son of Tabeel” refers to, but it is likely not someone of David’s line and may even be the son of the king of Tyre, either way it is a threat to the line of David.
- 7-9 - But God, in verses 7-9, says that this will not happen. They will not conquer Jerusalem or replace the line of David. In fact, these leaders and their nations that Ahaz is afraid of will cease to be a people.
 - Through a mirrored poem, God says, to put it simply, what you are afraid of won’t happen; if you aren’t firm in your faith in me but rather put your trust in Assyria, then you will not be firm (stand or endure) at all (outer layer).
 - The head of Syria is Rezin, and the head of Ephraim (Israel) is the son of Remaliah. They are just people, and not people of the house of David (middle layer).
 - Within 65 years Ephraim (Israel) will be shattered from being a people (center).
 - The focus is on what will happen to Ephraim (Israel) because they are the northern tribes, God’s people. They, however, have put their trust in a military alliance with Syria and have abandoned God; this misplaced trust will result in their destruction.
 - We know, in fact, from Ezra 4 and from history that around 65 years later was the final in a series of deportations (and importations) that resulted in Israel becoming a mixture of peoples, no longer identifiable as the northern kingdom, and we know from the records in Ezra that people from the northern tribes did not return to the land.
 - The point being made, then, is that trusting in military alliances rather than in God is not going to end well for the northern tribes, so Ahaz should not think that his military alliance with Assyria rather than trust in God is going to end well for him either.

7:10-25 - God’s Second Message to Ahaz - Immanuel

- 10-16 - The sign of “Immanuel” and the “virgin” birth
 - 65 years is a long time, though, so, probably immediately after this, we read in verse 10 that the Lord (still through Isaiah), told Ahaz to ask for a sign, whatever sign he wants.
 - Ahaz refuses, saying he won’t put God to the test, which sounds humble and pious at face value, but, from verse 13, we know that Ahaz was responding in rebellion and dismissal, not humility.
 - Notice how Ahaz is again referred to, by the way, as “house of David” and how the “your God” of 11 switches now to “my God” (Isaiah’s, no longer Ahaz’s) in 13. The house, the line, the tree of David, is abandoning and refusing God.
 - In response, Isaiah tells Ahaz that the Lord will give him a sign anyway: a virgin will have a son and call his name “Immanuel,” or “God is with us.”
 - By the time this child can refuse the evil and choose the good, or, in other words, is held accountable for moral choices (age 13 in Jewish society), he will eat curds (probably better translated as butter) and honey, which are delicacies, because the threat is gone and the land of the two threatening kings will be deserted, leaving plenty of food available.
 - The word translated here as “virgin” can mean virgin but usually means unmarried girl, young woman, or a recently married woman who has not yet had a child. There is a more specific Hebrew word for virgin that is not used here.
 - The phrase “a virgin shall conceive and bear a son” is probably best translated here as “a young woman will conceive and give birth” or possibly even “is pregnant and will bear” since the word translated as “shall conceive” is actually an adjective describing “young women” and has the idea of either already being pregnant or will be pregnant soon.
 - We know, in fact, from the historical markers included in this narrative and the parallel accounts in Kings and Chronicles, that this prophecy was given around 735 BC, and, thirteen years later, around 722 BC, Samaria, the capital of the northern tribes, was conquered and many of the people were deported. Syria had been conquered in 732.
 - Ahaz is checking water supplies now, but the plans of his enemies will fail, and food supplies will be plentiful before very long, for “Immanuel, God is with us” and “Shear-jashub, a remnant will return/God will preserve his people.”
 - Wait...all this build up to this prophecy, and this isn’t even about Christmas?
 - Just wait...something interesting is about to start happening with this Immanuel/promised son idea.
- 17-25 - Hope Turns to Threat
 - In verse 17, after giving this promise of the end of the threat of Syria and Israel, Isaiah suddenly turns the tables on Ahaz.
 - “The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father’s house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria!” (17)
 - Saving the final blow until the very end, Isaiah prophesies that what Ahaz is relying on will turn against him: the king of Assyria.
 - In the dramatic language of four “in that day” statements, the Lord announces the destruction that Assyria will bring to Judah. The irony is made explicit in verse 20: the razor that Ahaz hired will shave his people and his land.
 - The abundance of butter and honey that was at first a balm in the “Immanuel” prophecy due to showing Israel and Syria’s destruction is now turned into a promised destruction of his own land.

- Sure enough, we read in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles that Assyria did help Ahaz this time, but, later, when he asked for their help again against Edom and the Philistines, Assyria turned against him and “afflicted him instead of strengthening him.” In 2 Chron. 28:21, we read it simply put that Ahaz “gave tribute to the king of Assyria, but it did not help him.”

8:1-4 - God’s First Message to Isaiah - Maher-shalal-hash-baz

- After the two messages to Ahaz, God is now going to give 2 messages to Isaiah.
- First, God basically tells Isaiah to make it publicly known that his next son will be called Maher-shalal-hash-baz, or “the spoil speeds, the prey hastens.”
- Verses 3-4 then explain that the name of this child is symbolic of the fact that, before he learns how to talk, Damascus (Syria) and Samaria (Israel) will be spoiled and looted by the king of Assyria.
- By 732, just a couple years later, Syria was completely destroyed, and Israel had become a shell of itself, only the capital city and surrounding area remaining intact, their wealth having been taken to Assyria.

8:5-15 - God’s Second Message to Isaiah - Immanuel

- 7:10 transitions with “Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz” and speaks of Immanuel. So here, 8:5 transitions with “The Lord spoke to me again” and again speaks of Immanuel, but something is different this time.
- 8:5-8 is also similar to 7:14-17 in that it promises an end to the threat of Syria and Israel but also promises that the source of deliverance will become the source of trouble for Judah.
- The “this people” of verse 5 is talking specifically about Israel. They have refused “the waters of Shiloah” (Jerusalem’s water supply). Israel has rejected Jerusalem, its temple and the line and hope of David and instead rejoices over the foreign ruler of Syria and their own king, who is not of David’s line.
- Because they rejected the gentle Shiloah, they will get the mighty rushing water of the River (the Euphrates), which represents the king of Assyria and his might and power.
- This sounds good for the deliverance of Judah from the threat of Syria and Israel until we get to verse 8 and read that this same river will reach even to the neck of Judah.
- That it reaches to the neck is a threat of great trouble but trouble that does not completely drown. We will see later in Isaiah what this means.
- Notice how verses 8 and 10 both end with “Immanuel”/“God is with us.”
- In verse 8, we read that the Assyrians will reach to the neck but not completely destroy Immanuel’s land.
- In 9-10, this is broadened out to say that all enemies of God will not ultimately succeed against the people of God. “Immanuel,” God is with us. **“Immanuel” is a sign that God will deliver his people.**
- 11-15 finish God’s message to Isaiah as God strongly tells him to not fear or dread what the people do. Rather, honor and fear the Lord. The Lord will become a sanctuary—he will be seen as holy—and he will be a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both Israel and Judah for those who do not honor him.
- Put your trust in the Lord and you will stand firm. Put your trust in something else, and you will fall.

8:16-9:7 - Isaiah’s Response and Concluding Prophecy

- Isaiah responds by having the word of the Lord sealed, or confirmed and preserved, among his followers, vowing to wait and hope in the Lord, who currently is hiding his face from Judah for its rebellion.
- He declares that he and his children are signs: Maher-shalal-hash-baz, “the spoil speeds, and the prey hastens”--destruction is coming for Israel and for Judah, but Shear-jashub, “a remnant will return” --the stump, the holy seed, will return. A remnant of the people will return and the line of David will not fail.
- In verses 19-21, he warns the people to not inquire or look to idols and the false gods, but to God. Don’t inquire of the dead, of those who have no dawn, no light, power, or hope. Inquire of the living God. Look to his teachings and his testimony. If you look elsewhere, you will find distress and darkness.

- Finally, 9:1-7 closes by continuing this thought in a prophecy of hope—in fact, a promise of hope, for this prophecy is written in the past tense, as if it has already happened, for these things are so sure.
- As with the visions of chapter 2 and chapter 4, we read of restoration and glory. Where there was darkness and gloom, there will be light and joy.
- Zebulun and Naphtali, the northernmost tribe that served as a “gateway” for invasions and destruction, will become the gateway that the nations will come through not for war but to peacefully worship God.
- War will be over. There will be peace and joy, for a child will be born who will rule with peace, justice, and righteousness. He will be of the line of David and sit on the throne of David forever. “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.”
- “His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”
- “The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.”
- Wait... “Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Are we still talking about a person, about a descendant of David?? Who is this child who will be born “in the latter time”? Who is this son of David who will sit on his throne, right all wrongs, be a light to the nations, and rule forever?

Conclusion - Jesus as “Immanuel”

- Tomorrow, we celebrate the birth of this son, the “Son of David, the “Mighty God,” the “Prince of Peace,” born as a baby in Bethlehem.
- Ahaz and the people thought they needed deliverance, or salvation, from a physical threat, and they did, but these chapters, the rest of Isaiah, and the whole Bible tell us that this is not our greatest need.
- In chapter 7-39 of Isaiah, we are going to see repeated failures by the line of David, and we will see repeated deliverances from physical threats, only for the people to rebel again and need deliverance...again.
- Isaiah 1-39 is known as, “the book of the king,” and, especially in 7-39, we see that the people feel the need for and are promised a greater king, one who is of the line of David who will deliver them.
- The constant failure of the line of David—even a good king like Hezekiah, as we will see later—shows, though, that the problem is much deeper than the people think.
- The continued rebellion eventually leads to the destruction, deportation, and exile of Judah under the next empire, Babylon. Then the next empire, Persia, allows the people to go back, and, in Caleb’s sermon series in Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah, we saw that the people rebuilt and were delivered from physical threats again, rededicated themselves again, only to rebel and fall into sin again..and again.
- The cycle of sin & rebellion→judgment→deliverance is repeated again and again through the entire Old Testament, and it ends with the people back in the land but still rebelling, and God’s presence didn’t even return to the temple they had built, no glory cloud came down this time.
- In Isaiah 40-55, we will see the promise of a King morph into the promise of a Servant who will bear the sin of the people and deliver them from what has been their greatest problem all along: their sin.
- Isaiah saw his greatest need in chapter 6, one day the people will see it too.
- One day, a virgin—literally a virgin this time—will bear a son and call his name Jesus, meaning “Yahwah saves,” “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Isaiah’s prophecy will have a greater fulfillment to fill an even greater need—in fact, our greatest need—through one who is not *called* Immanuel, but *is* Immanuel, God with us. The glory of God here on earth, in human flesh.
- The deliverance announced to Ahaz, a son of David, is but a picture of the greater deliverance announced to Joseph, a son of David, in the birth of a child, born to save us, born to take our sins and die in our place, born to give us the same call that Ahaz received but rejected: Trust in me.

Isaiah 9:8-12:6

Light Beyond the Darkness

Introduction

Happy New Year's Eve, everyone! I know the week between Christmas and New Year's is often kind of a no man's land where time seems irrelevant and we find it hard to keep track of what day it is. I know we are also all busy with the holidays; so I think it works out pretty well that this week's text is pretty similar to last week's, as far as content goes: judgment will come, but so too will deliverance and restoration.

Last week, we saw through the prophecies of Immanuel and Isaiah's sons, Shear-jashub and Maher-shalal-hash-baz, the promises that the threat of Syria and Israel would not last long due to God's judgment of them but also that Judah would face punishment from Assyria, though not total destruction, for God is with them and would preserve a remnant. The ten northern tribes of Israel had long rebelled against God and were about to be punished with destruction and exile. Judah, however, is headed in the same direction and will face judgment from the very power they asked to help them against Israel: Assyria.

Chapter 7:1-9:7 ended with a promise of a greater son of David, a greater Immanuel, who would rule forever in righteousness and justice and bring peace. He will be a light to the nations, and even the two most northern tribes, Zebulon and Naphtali, who had borne the brunt of invasions due to their position, he will cause to become a gateway of peace and joy for all nations.

This week, in 9:8-12:6, we are going to again read about God's just judgment of Israel and how he will use Assyria to punish them as well as Judah to the extent that he allows, but a couple new things are going to happen: we are going to read about God's response to and judgment of Assyria, and we are going to see the promise of the Messiah continue to develop as we learn more about what he will accomplish.

9:8-12:6 is framed more theologically than the previous two chapters. In 7:1-9:8, we learned that Israel's plans against Judah will fail, but why will they fail? Because Ahaz made a crafty alliance with Assyria and because Assyria is more powerful than Israel and her ally, Syria? At face value, yes, but, in reality, no. In 9:8-12:6, the curtain is pulled back even more to remind us who the real King is. Assyria may be powerful, but the true King and Judge is the Lord, not any earthly power.

Commentary

9:8-10:4 - Judgment Against Israel

- 9:8 makes this point clear as it opens up with the fall of the gavel. "The Lord has sent a word against Jacob, and it will fall on Israel."
- 9:9-10 - They have become prideful and arrogant, thinking themselves self-sufficient and able to recover and even become stronger after any loss.
- 9:11-12 - But God will send their enemies against them, and even the alliance with Syria will turn into a source of destruction: "For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still."
 - This attack of Assyria against Israel and Syria is not the end, more judgment is coming. As we talked about last week, we know that Israel suffered repeated loss until the capital city was finally destroyed in 722, and around 670 there was a final major deportation
 - That "his hand is stretched out still" refers to this continued destruction, but it would also have an ominous tone of warning to Judah, who is currently also rebelling against the Lord.
 - Pay attention, by the way, to this language about the hand of the Lord being "stretched out." The hand of the Lord being "stretched out" is a purposeful image being used.
 - It is an image of great acts of divine judgment and deliverance. We see this phrase used many times in the book of Exodus both in judgment against Pharaoh and the Egyptians and in God's deliverance of his people. Keep this imagery in mind...we will get back to it later.

- 9:8-10:4 - Through 4 stanzas, each closing with this same declaration of judgment, we see that God’s judgment is declared to be just.
 - 9:8-12 - In stanza 1, as we just read, we read of the arrogance and pride of the people.
 - 9:13-17 - In stanza 2, we read that the entire society has become godless and full of evil, from the leaders who have been leading them astray to even the fatherless and widows (usually defended by God) who have followed after these false leaders and become evil as well.
 - 9:18-21 - In stanza 3, the wickedness, hatred, back-biting, and lack of brotherly love seen in the people is put in graphic language. It is said to be like a fire that consumes and leaves the land scorched. The people themselves are the fuel for this fire as they devour each other, brother against brother, and brothers forming alliances against their own brothers.
 - 10:1-4 - In the fourth and final stanza, the leaders are again judged for their injustice and oppression of the poor and needy. They write laws to prey on and spoil the helpless. In the dark irony of verses 3-4, the Lord asks them who will help them and where will their wealth be on the “day of punishment”? When God’s judgment comes down, they will be among the prisoners and the slain: those who spoiled and preyed on others will themselves be spoiled and become prey.
- One commentator summarizes these stanzas well and also shows how they transition to the next section:
- “So, for all these offenses against God—pride, false leadership, devouring one’s brothers, oppression of the poor—the divine hand is outstretched. It is not Assyria’s overwhelming power which dictates the future of Ephraim and Judah; it is their failure to submit to God and to live in accordance with his principles. It is that failure which will destroy them. God is with us for good or ill. The Assyrias of this world do not hold the balances: God does, and the Assyrias are weighed with the rest of us.” (NICOT)

10:5-19 - Judgment Against Assyria

- “The Assyrians are weighed with the rest of us.” 10:5-19 answers the question of the historical cynic: “Isn’t God just claiming credit for something Assyria did? Isn’t Assyria the real ‘god’ here?”
- It answers the question of the theological cynic: “How can God use a wicked empire to punish his own people? Shouldn’t he punish the empire as well?”
- And it answers the question of the ancient cynic as well: “Isn’t the god of the victor the supreme god?”
- All of these questions are answered in the very first phrase, which is then explained in the following verses: “Woe to Assyria.” The Lord is the real, the supreme, God. He will hold Assyria accountable.
- 5-6 - He is using Assyria as a rod and staff of his anger against his people, who have rejected him.
- 7 - Assyria doesn’t realize that they are being allowed to do this as a judgment that God is bringing. They simply want to conquer. They give no thought to God, who gives us our very breath (2:22).
- 8-11 - “He,” Assyria, is arrogant and believes that he can conquer whatever he has the mind to.
 - Notice that we do not read a specific king’s name here for the king of Assyria, just “he.”
 - This is on purpose because it is a condemnation against the Assyrian empire itself and all of its kings. The cities mentioned in 9-11 are the conquests of at least 4 different kings of Assyria.
- Each pair of conquered cities moves geographically closer to Jerusalem and ends with the question, “shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols as I have done to Samaria (Israel) and her images?”
- 12 - The answer to this question is given in verse 12: “When the Lord has finished all his work (of judgment) on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king.”
 - Assyria will be allowed to cause trouble for Jerusalem, but only to the extent that God allows.
 - Once God determines the judgment is enough, he will then bring his judgment down on Assyria.
 - The very reason for the judgment of God on his people, in fact—their pride, arrogance, and rejection of God—will be the reason for God’s judgment on Assyria.

- 13-14 - In 13-14, we read that Assyria believes it is their own power, their own “hand,” that has accomplished their victories and (combining these thoughts with v. 9-11) will also conquer Jerusalem.
- 15 - God answers in mocking irony: “Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it, or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it? As if a rod should wield him who lifts it, or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood!”
 - Assyria may be the physical hand of judgment against Israel and Judah, but it is only because they are being used as the hand of the Lord that is stretched out in judgment.
 - The same hand that is stretched out in judgment against his people will turn and stretch out in judgment against Assyria.
- 16-19 - The Lord will come in judgment like a wasting sickness and fire among the Assyrian army, and “and under his glory a burning will be kindled.” This is a poetic way of saying a funeral pyre will be lit under the king of Assyria and his power. In other words, he will suffer a great loss that is like death.
 - The “light of Israel” and “his Holy One,” that is, the Lord, will become a fire that burns and devours Assyria or like a sickness that wastes him away. The kings of Assyria were known to call themselves “the light of Assyria.” Well, God says, “my light is brighter and more powerful.”
 - The wrath of the Lord that scorched the land of Israel (9:19) will turn and scorch Assyria as well.
 - The destruction will be so great that it will be as if a child is able to count those who remain.
 - We will see this destruction and judgment later in the judgment of God on the Assyrian army to deliver Jerusalem from their siege in chapter 37.

10:20-34 - A Remnant Will Return

- 20-23 - On that day, the remnant of God’s people will finally stop relying on Assyria.
 - They will see that their faith in Assyria was misplaced and turn back to God.
 - But, though the people were as the sand of the sea, only a remnant will return to God, for righteous judgment and destruction is decreed for their rebellion against God.
 - Some in Israel and Judah, apparently, took God’s promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as the sand of the seashore (Gen. 22:17) to mean that God would never bring judgment and destruction to them. God strongly calls them out on this misunderstanding of his promise.
- 21 - You will notice an interesting phrase, by the way, in verse 21: “the remnant of Jacob.” Jacob is mentioned twice in just 2 verses, “House of Jacob” in 20 and “remnant of Jacob” here in 21. I think this is entirely on purpose, for we are about to see something similar in chapter 11. Both of these chapters take a step back in the genealogy and remind the reader of God’s original plan.
 - “Jacob” has actually been used a few times already in Isaiah.
 - In 2:3, it is used in the vision of the restored, elevated Jerusalem.
 - In 2:5, it is used in the call to the people to come back and walk in the light of the Lord.
 - In 2:6; 8:17; & 9:8, it is used in God’s rejection & judgment of his people, both Israel & Judah.
 - Here, in 10:20-21, it is a statement that the remnant of Jacob, currently represented by Judah, will return to the Lord. “Jacob” brings to mind all 12 sons—all twelve tribes—all of God’s people.
 - This word is on purpose to prepare us for what we are about to read in the next chapter.
 - The immediate context of deliverance and restoration is Judah being delivered from Assyria, but Isaiah is also constantly pointing to a future, greater deliverance and restoration.
- 24 - Getting back to chapter 10, though, “Therefore,” the Lord says, ““O my people, who dwell in Zion, be not afraid of the Assyrians.””
- In 25-27, God promises that his anger will come to an end and will turn against Assyria.

- He will strike Assyria as when he struck Midian. Remember Gideon's tiny army and how God did basically all the fighting for him to deliver his people?
- He will do a great act of deliverance as when he parted the sea when the people were leaving Egypt. The burden of his people will be lifted and their yoke broken.
- 28-34 - In 28-34, we read this promise put into the terms of an advancing army.
 - 28-32 list cities in order that the Assyrian army would march through on their way to Jerusalem.
 - 32 says "he," the Assyrian army, will get close enough to shake his fist at Jerusalem.
 - But we read in 33-34, "Behold the Lord God of Hosts." Behold, the Lord will lop him down. The high and lofty will be brought low. "He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an ax."
 - Wait, I thought Assyria was the ax (10:15)? That's the point. Assyria was an ax in God's hands, but, as powerful of an ax as they think themselves to be, God is able to wield a more powerful ax of his own against them to judge them, for he is the Lord of Hosts (Armies).

11:1-16 - The "Shoot from the Stump of Jesse"

- 1 - The Lord will lop down the tall trees of Assyria, and "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of (not Assyria, but) Jesse, and a branch from his (Jesse's) roots will bear fruit."
 - Assyria may think themselves mighty, but they will be lopped down, and it will be from the remnant of God's people, not Assyria, that, one day, a shoot, or sprout, will come up.
 - This new shoot from the stump and roots of Jesse will bear fruit and bring new growth.
- 2-5 - This "shoot" will be a righteous ruler and judge, filled with the Spirit and the fear of the Lord, and he will do what all the rulers of God's people had failed to do before him.
 - He will be filled with the Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and fear of the Lord. He will judge with righteousness and impartiality. He will judge the wicked and be clothed in righteousness and faithfulness.
- 6-9 - When this "shoot" reigns, there will be peace and safety.
 - A peaceful animal kingdom is beautiful to imagine, but the rest of chapter 11, I think, makes it plain that this is more about the relationships between people and reversing the effects of the fall.
 - 9 says, "They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."
 - There will be peace, for all the earth, all people, will be full of the knowledge of the Lord. The whole earth will become the holy mountain.
- 10 - "The root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious." The root of Jesse will become a new, greater Solomon.
 - The "signal" from God in 5:26 for the nations far away and from the ends of the earth to come and judge God's people turns into a "signal" here in 10 for all people to come inquire of him and again in 12 for all his people to gather to him from the ends of the earth.
- The "stump of Jesse" (1) and now "the root of Jesse"...This chapter is the only place in the Bible that refers to the line of David in this way, so what is going on?
 - I think God, through Isaiah, is making the point that, in light of the repeated failures of the line of David, a greater "son of Jesse," a greater David, is needed, one truly "after God's own heart."
 - In fact, the line of David all but fails. The OT ends with no king, and, as you open the NT, Herod (whose father was an Edomite) calls himself the "king of the Jews," though Rome is in charge.
 - As one author puts it: "Isaiah's use of 'root of Jesse' expresses the promise of a messianic king who would be born of David's family line and focuses Judah's expectation of survival on a sparse, leaderless remnant. God's judgment was coming on Judah, and the nation would be left

with nothing but a seemingly lifeless “stump,” but there would be life yet. God promised to retain a remnant to carry on His work and the bloodline of King David. What seemed to be a dead, decaying stump would bring forth new life in the Messiah.” (GQ.com)

- Reference to Jesse rather than David may also be a way of foreshadowing a Messiah who comes from humble origins, for Jesse simply a shepherd.
- 11-16 - When this Messiah reigns, the Lord will “extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant.” His hand will be extended, not in judgment this time, but deliverance.
 - The first time was the exodus. One day, there will be an even greater exodus. God will recover all his people, from not just Egypt but all places where they oppressed, no matter how far.
 - 13 - Jealousies and hostilities will be gone. Ephraim and Judah will be reunited, God’s people restored in harmony.
 - 14 - Not only will there be internal peace, as in 13, but 14 describes a time of external peace as well. What is described is the peace created by the historical kingdom of David.
 - 15-16 close this chapter by saying that the Lord will part the waters of Egypt and Assyria. He will create a greater exodus out of all earthly kingdoms.

12:1-6 - The Song of the Redeemed

- In response to this greater exodus, this section closes with a thanksgiving song which purposefully shares many phrases with the song in Exodus 15, sung after the first exodus.
- Chapter 5, the end of the introduction, had begun with singing that turned into darkness and judgment, with the people being promised exile and expulsion from the land, from God’s presence
- Chapter 6 then opened the next section with darkness as well, a dying king and a message of judgment.
- Chapter 12 now closes with singing, salvation, and the “Holy One of Israel” dwelling in their midst.
- Chapter 6 ended with a burnt stump that was the hope of the holy seed. 12 is a song of thanksgiving for the work accomplished by the “shoot” from that stump.
- In 6, Isaiah was forgiven, called into God’s presence, and commissioned to spread his word. Now, in 12, all God’s people are forgiven, gathered into his presence, and told to proclaim his name and deeds.
- Isaiah closes this section, 6-12, by basically saying, “What happened to me needs to happen to all of us, and one day it will. My one voice proclaiming his word will turn into an entire redeemed, recovered, re-unified community through the work of a ‘shoot from the stump of Jesse’ who will bring salvation and an exodus even greater than the one out of Egypt.”

Conclusion

So, what do these chapters teach us?

- In 9:8-10:19, we see that all people, no matter how immune they think they are or how powerful they think they are, are held accountable to God. His people thought the promises to Abraham excused them from needing to live for him, and Assyria thought they were powerful enough to ignore him. The truth is that he is the King and Judge of all of us. He gives us our very breath and calls us to live for him with it. It is an individual choice we must all make to live in faith and love, to live out his heart.
- In light of this, we all face the same question that Ahaz and later Hezekiah and the people of Judah were asked by Isaiah. Who will you trust? Who will you serve?
- In their day it was Assyria or the Lord, but we see throughout the book of Isaiah that Assyria is simply the current model of the constant question. Will you trust what your eyes see and what the world says, or what God has told you?
- If your ultimate hope and faith is in the things of this world, they will turn on you. If your hope is in God’s word and his Messiah, you will find peace and spend eternity with him.

Isaiah 13:1-14:27

First Oracle, Babylon: A Look Behind the Scenes

Introduction

Today, we enter the part of Isaiah where your reading plan dies. Up to this point, we have had the introduction in chapters 1-5, Isaiah's call to ministry in chapter 6, and then a bunch of discussion and prophecies related to the threat against Judah from the alliance of Israel and Syria and how this will ironically turn into a threat against Judah by the very power they turned to for help against their northern neighbors: Assyria. We have already worked through some of the most well-known material in Isaiah in chapters 1, 6, 7, 9, and 11.

Now, we are abruptly greeted in chapter 13 with an oracle (or, announcement of judgment).and the oracles keep going until chapter 27. Then the next eight chapters, 28-35, are going to be a series of six woes. Finally, in chapters 36-39, our reading usually picks back up as we breathe a sigh of relief and get back into narrative. Then, we can usually stay engaged, at least for the most part, for the rest of the book as it talks about the Suffering Servant for a few chapters (especially 53) then it starts talking about the final restoration and the new heaven and earth for the last few chapters (especially 65-66).

But what about this section in the middle? What is going on with all these oracles and woes and feel almost random and seem to go back and forth in time? As I have said before, when it comes to Bible reading, if it seems weird, it is probably important. These chapters seem weird, repetitive, and hard to understand, but, rather than skimming past them, we are going to slow down and see what is going on.

The first step to seeing what is going on is asking, "What is the context?" How do these chapters fit into the book? What is Isaiah trying to accomplish with them? To answer this, we must think about what has happened in the book so far. In 1-5, we had the introduction, or background information, for the book in which we saw that the people have turned away from the Lord. Their worship is empty and fake, and their leadership and society is corrupt, wicked, and godless. They have turned to every idol and worldly power instead of to the Lord. We read in chapter 5 that God had poured all his love and care into his people, his vineyard, but they had rejected him and produced not the good grapes that one would expect from the loving work put in by God, the vinedresser, but instead they had produced wild, inedible, useless grapes of rejection and wickedness.

For this, God, the Judge, is justly sending punishment and exile to his people. They will, in effect, be cast from his presence. But, even in the midst of this condemnation and judgment of chapters 1-5, we see visions and promises of hope, salvation, and restoration in the beginnings of chapters 2 and 4. Though they have abandoned him, God will not abandon his people. He has a plan and a future for them. Judgment will come, but so too will cleansing, restoration, and union with God, dwelling once again in his presence. One day, the mountain of the Lord will be where his people and all nations will come for teaching and live together in peace.

In chapter 6, we saw in Isaiah's call to ministry a foreshadowing of what needs to happen to the people. At a time when King Uzziah of Judah was dying and the threat of the Assyrian empire was rising, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on his throne, the Supreme Ruler of the world. Isaiah saw the Lord for who he is and saw that, one day, the glory of the Lord will be seen in all the earth, and Isaiah saw that his greatest need was to be cleansed and forgiven by the King of Kings, and, after having been granted this forgiveness, to joyfully serve him, placing his trust completely in the Lord.

The message Isaiah is given to say to Judah is a message of judgment. Just as we read in chapter 5, the people will be punished and exiled. They will hear and see God's message, but they will respond with hardness of heart and will not repent. Isaiah is told that the people will not listen to him. His success will not be measured by their response, but by his faithfulness to God. The people will face all but total destruction, but the stump will remain, and "the holy seed is the stump" (6:13).

In the next chapters, 7-12, we see the reality of the message begin as we jump a few years forward in time. Ahaz, the new king of Judah, is facing a threat from an alliance of his northern neighbors, Israel and Syria, who are attempting to force him into their alliance against the Assyrian Empire. Rather than turning to God for help, Ahaz instead turns to the Assyrian Empire itself and gives treasures from the Lord's temple to Assyria to bribe them to help him, effectively saying that he trusts Assyria and their gods rather than the Lord. Isaiah meets Ahaz as he is preparing for the coming siege, and tells him to be careful to trust in the Lord. He gives Ahaz multiple prophecies and promises that tell Ahaz that God is with them and that this threat will not last, but Ahaz refuses to listen. In response, God, through Isaiah, tells Ahaz that the Assyrian empire will help Ahaz this time, but they will soon turn on Judah and only an act of the Lord's divine deliverance will save them.

Throughout these chapters, Ahaz and the people are constantly given the question, "In whom will you trust? The Lord or Assyria? The Lord or your own strength, plans, and human wisdom?" In chapter 10, the Lord made clear that even the powerful Assyrian Empire is not stronger than him. They too are held accountable to him and only able to do what he allows. He will deliver his people—his people who had rejected him—from the hands of the Assyrians to show that he is the one in whom they should trust. Then, in 11, he extends this promise to say that, one day, there will come another son of Jesse, a greater David, who will be the perfect and holy King, filled with the Spirit. He will rule in righteousness, justice, and peace. He will live perfectly in the fear of the Lord and be perfect where Ahaz and all the other kings have failed. He will gather all God's people, end all oppression, and free all captives. One day, there will be a deliverance greater even than that of Gideon's day, and one day there will be an exodus greater even than that out of Egypt. So, who will you trust?

These claims—that God is the King over all kings, that he holds even the most powerful empires accountable, that he knows the future and holds their fates, that he will preserve his people through the crashing waves of competing empires (even as he holds his own people accountable for their own sins), and that he will one day set a perfect King on the throne of David and bring peace, gathering all his people to himself—these claims are what drive these chapters. From the timestamps in 14:28 and 20:1, we know that the content of these chapters was given to the people during the last part of Ahaz's reign and during the beginning of his son Hezekiah's reign. During this time, and in light of Ahaz and the people turning to Assyria for help rather than the Lord during the conflict of Judah with her northern neighbors, Isaiah zooms out in space and time to show God, the real King who is greater than any empire or emperor, at work and call the people to trust in him.

Chapters 13-27 break up into 3 series of oracles—13-20, 21-23, and 24-27—and each of these sections has 5 oracles. As you go through these sections, the content moves from the present and near future to the Last Day. As the content moves into the future Last Day, the headings become less clear as everything seems to merge together from Isaiah's perspective. He is sure about the end of the story, but not so sure about the details of the future as he is about the details of the present and near future (sounds a bit like Revelation, doesn't it?).

Chapters 13-27, by and large are very zoomed out and future-facing, though they contain three near-future prophecies. Chapters 28-35 follow these chapters by answering the question of the skeptic and dealing with more near-term prophecies to prove that God can also be trusted with the distant future. You will notice, though, that Isaiah cannot talk long about current or near future events without quickly starting to talk about the future and the Last Day. The reason for this—and the point he is continually trying to make—is that God's actions and trustworthiness in the present and near future consistently prove that he can be trusted for all of the distant future as well. In fact, when we get back into some narrative in chapter 36, we will see this point made very clear in the time of Hezekiah.

Today, though, as we begin our dive into the oracles and woes of 13-35, we are going to look at 13:1-14:27, which is the first of five oracles in the first series of oracles in 13-27. The very first oracle deals, surprisingly, with Babylon, not Assyria, as you would expect. So, what is going on?

Commentary

13:1- Why Babylon?

- Why start with Babylon? I think Isaiah starts with Babylon rather than Assyria because he has already prophesied that the Lord will deliver Judah from the Assyrian threat that will come. We saw this in 8:8-10 and multiple times in chapter 10. Isaiah knows that Judah will be overthrown and exiled, but he also knows that it will not be Assyria that does this.
- Babylon is already at this time challenging Assyria for dominance, and Isaiah, with divine assistance, sees that it will be Babylon who causes this destruction and exile, not Assyria.
- Babylon, then, is the real threat, the real superpower.
- Babylon is also, ironically, the symbol of humanity's attempt to find security, stability, and trust in their own resources, in rejection of God.
- The tower of Babel was built in the land of Shinar (Gen. 11:1-4), which is the land of Babylonia, or, later, the heart of the Babylonian empire.
- We will find out later in Isaiah, that Hezekiah, like his father Ahaz had before him, seeks an alliance with a world power rather than trusting God—only for Hezekiah, it is Babylon, not Assyria.
- Hezekiah is judged for this rejection of God and told that Babylon will one day turn on Judah and exile it...man doesn't history just repeat itself.
- Babylon, then, opens these chapters which focus on the question of trust by pointing backward and forward to humanity's rejection of God and incessant desire to find security in their own resources.
- What started at Babel is coming full circle. The people, the descendants of Abraham, called and chosen out of the people scattered from Babel have rejected God and will be brought right back to Babel.

13:2-22 - Judgment of Babylon

- Starting in verse 2, though, we see that even this superpower, even this empire that will destroy and exile God's people, is held accountable to God and will be overthrown through his act of judgment.
- Throughout this chapter, we see, in typical Isaiah fashion, that this act and judgment of God is framed in universal, cosmic, supernatural "day of the Lord" language. We see this especially in verses 6-13.
- You read these verses, and you might ask yourself, "Wait, are we talking about the end of the world or the end of the Babylonian empire?" Then you read verse 17, and it becomes clear that it is the latter.
- So why the cosmic, "day of the Lord," end-of-the-world language?
- The point that Isaiah is making again and again in chapters 13-35 is that the God who shows his Lordship over all people and empires can be trusted when he speaks of even more distant events and tells you how the story will end. Trust him. Live for him.
- In chapter 10, we read that the God who delivered his people at Midian and brought them out of Egypt can be trusted to deliver them from the Assyrians.
- Here, in 13:19, we read that the God who overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah will overthrow Babylon.
- The signal of 5:26 that called the nations to destroy and exile Judah—ultimately fulfilled by Babylon—will turn into a signal that calls for the destruction of Babylon, as we read here in 13:2. In fact, the reasons for their judgment (scattered throughout the chapter and seen again in chapter 14) sound a lot like the reasons for the judgment of Judah.
- All people are held accountable to God. We saw this with Assyria, and we see it again with Babylon.

14:1-2 - The Restoration of Jacob

- This is not the only theme that we see again from earlier, though. 14:1 transitions back into another promise that God will not forget his people.

- After the judgment on Babylon, God will bring them back to their own land, and people even from other nations will choose to join them. God will reverse the roles, and the restored Israel will become the world leader, who other nations come to, just as we saw in chapter 2.
- Exile will be done and reversed. God's people will return from Babel to come to the Promised Land.

14:3-23 - A Taunt Against the King of Babylon

- 14:3-4 then transitions into a taunt or, more literally, a proverbial victory song, against the king of Babylon.
- This song has some similarities to the song in Ex. 15 after the exodus, especially the theme of the oppressor who thought himself high and mighty being brought down to Sheol, or the underworld. It also is similar to the songs seen later Rev. 18-19 sung at the final destruction of the proverbial Babylon, or enemy of the people of God and center of godlessness.
- In verses 4-11, we read, in this song of victory, that God will destroy Babylon and that the earth will rejoice at this. The king of Babylon will go down to Sheol and be greeted by all the other kings and rulers that God has brought down throughout history.
- Verses 12-21 continue the song against the king of Babylon and are similar to Ezekiel 28:1-19 in its song against the leader of Tyre. Both here and in Ezekiel, the leader believes himself to be equal to the most high God but is brought down and humiliated, shown to not be a god at all, let alone the Most High. In both accounts, the leader is cast into a pit and buried with the slain. Both do not receive a proper grave. Those around them are appalled at both and their downfall. The line of both is cut off.
- Here in Isaiah 14, the "I will"s of the pride of the king of Babylon in 13-14 are answered by the "I will"s of promised destruction in 22-23.
- Both of these passages have caused many questions about whether or not they are talking about the fall of the Devil. Isaiah 14:22-23, however, immediately reminds us that we are still talking about the king of Babylon, just as Ezekiel 28 reminds us we are talking about Tyre.
- Just as the judgment against Babylon in chapter 13 used cosmic language to show God's Lordship over all people and empires, though, I think it is fair to say that there is cosmic language being used here and in Ezekiel 28 to show God's Lordship over all enemies of God.
- Through known Canaanite theological terms, such the end of verse 13, which more literally translates to "the remote parts (apex) of Zaphon" (Mount Zaphon, the seat of the Canaanite gods), the kings of Babylon and the king of Tyre are pictured as seeking to become the most high God in their pride.
- The imagery of Ezekiel 28:13-16, though, in Genesis 1-3, imagery; so, I think there is an argument to be made that both these texts work together to show God's Lordship over divine enemies as well and that he will bring them down just as he brings down human kings and empires.
- It is just like Isaiah (and Ezekiel) to blend the present, past, and future and the natural and supernatural.
- God is Lord over all. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He alone is worthy of our faith and trust.

14:24-27 - Judgment of Assyria

- And, just in case this all feels too distant and cosmic, the first oracle closes with a more imminent prophecy as an assurance that God is worthy of trust.
- God will break the Assyrians to show that his purposes and plans for Babylon and all the earth and all of time will stand.
- We read in 26 that his hand is stretched out. It is stretched out over Assyria, over Babylon, and over all nations.
- Verses 26-27 form a fitting conclusion to this whole section, as the imagery of the stretched out hand also reminds us of God's deliverance of his people as well, just as we read in 14:1-2

Conclusion

In fact, this section 13:1-14:27, forms a chiasm (no surprise there). The declaration of judgment on Babylon in 13:1-16 is matched by the declaration of judgment on Assyria in 14:24-27. The overthrow of Babylon in 13:17-22 is matched by the song about the overthrow of the king of Babylon in 14:3-23. At the very center is 14:1-2 and God's compassion and plan for his people.

His hand is outstretched. It is outstretched to judge the prideful and arrogant and those who reject God, whether they be kings, empires, or his own people who reject him. But his hand is also outstretched in compassion and love to preserve and purify his people, to save and deliver those who put their trust in Him.

God gave the people the prophecy against Assyria so that they would see in their lifetime that he is worthy of their trust despite the threat and power of Babylon or any worldly power. Babylon would take them into exile, but that would not be the end of their story. God's plans will not fail, and his purposes will succeed until the very end of history when he rights all wrongs and sets his perfect King on the throne of David to rule forever.

Trust and faith in God may not fix your circumstances and may not deliver you from your current troubles. The people in Isaiah's day had to wait probably 20-30 years to see even the prophecy against Assyria fulfilled. Trust and faith in God may not mean that people like or accept the message you give or that you feel successful. Remember that in chapter 6 Isaiah was commissioned to a ministry of known failure.

But trust and faith in God means that you see him rightly and see the world rightly. He is the Lord and Judge of all who will hold us all accountable. He calls us all to live the best we can for him where we are, whether or not this changes our circumstances. It is our job to live faithfully and obediently and his job to run the world. One day, he will hold all who reject him and live in sin accountable. One day, he will right all wrongs and make all things new and perfect. One day, the pain and tears of this world will be healed and wiped away. Our faith, trust, and obedience shows that we believe this to be so.

He didn't promise us that it will be easy, but he did promise us that he will be with us. In fact, the Immanuel ("God is with us") promise of Isaiah 7 turned into a greater Immanuel, Jesus, who was born as "God with us," and he promised in his "Great Commission" at the end of Matthew 28: "Behold, I am with you (Immanuel) always, to the end of the age." And he sends the Holy Spirit to those who believe as a guarantee, or down payment, of our future hope and inheritance. For it is not a wishful hope, but a sure hope.

Isaiah 14:28-20:6

First Series of Oracles: Sure Promises

Introduction

Last week, we looked at 13:1-14:27, which was the first of the five oracles in chapters 13-20. Today, we are going to look at the other four oracles. The five oracles from last week and this week work together to form the first of the three series of oracles seen in chapters 13-27. So, this week, we will finish the first series, then over the next two weeks, we will look at the other two series. Each of the three series has five oracles, but where each oracle starts becomes less clear as you work through the chapters and as the content focuses more and more on the distant and final future.

As the content of each series moves towards the future, it is helpful to summarize each of the three series and what Isaiah seems to be seeking to accomplish in how these chapters have been arranged. I say, “how these chapters have been arranged,” by the way, because, like I said last week, it seems best to understand that oracles of 13-27 and the woes of 28-35 represent a sampling of the messages that Isaiah gave to the people during the times of Ahaz and Hezekiah. These messages were then arranged for a written form that delivers a message through the order of the oracles.

The first series of oracles, 13-20, blends the present, near future, and end of time to show that the Lord will keep his word and his promises to his people. The second series, 21-23, looks sometime beyond the near future and is more mysterious and ominous than the first series. In this second series, there is a sense of doom and darkness, but, as always in Isaiah, we see the light of the dawn even in this darkness. The third and final series, 24-27, looks to the end of time and can be summarized as “a tale of two cities”: the city of the world, in which everything is found to be meaningless and the city is destroyed, and the city of God, in which there is righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation for all the people of God, who come from the whole world.

Isaiah, then, uses the progression of these chapters, 13-27, to prove that God can be trusted to keep his word and his promises so that the people will know they can trust God through the coming time of darkness. No darkness can put out the light of God’s purposes. The “city of the world” will not win. Assyria, Babylon, or any other world power is not more powerful than God. One day, the city of the world, putting faith and trust in anything other than God, will be exposed as vain and meaningless. One day, God’s promises and plans will be seen as the only thing worthy of our faith and trust, as his “city” is established, where he lives with his people forever, and there is finally perfect peace and righteousness.

As we begin to see this message unfold, let’s look to chapter 14:28-20:6.

Commentary

14:28-32 - Second Oracle: Philistia

- The oracle against Philistia is very confusing to follow who or what each verse is referring to if you don’t know the history of what is happening.
- This is why it starts with the timestamp of “in the year that king Ahaz died.” Even this, though, is confusing, because this introduction would lead you to believe that Ahaz is the “broken” rod that the next verses refers to, but he is not.
- Commentators argue for a few different views of these verses, but, to me, what makes the most sense is that the time of Ahaz’s death was around the time of a known Philistine revolt against Assyria. The Assyrian Empire was certainly a “rod” that had struck the Philistines many times, and the occasion of Ahaz’s death would have been an occasion for Philistia to send messengers with their condolences and an invitation to the new King, Hezekiah, to join their revolt against Assyria.

- This would also explain the mention of “messengers” in verse 32 and why the answer to these messengers is about where the people of Zion should find refuge.
- Philistia is rejoicing that the Assyrian Empire is currently weakened, but God, through Isaiah, tells them that from this broken rod, this serpent (Exodus rod/serpent imagery?), will come an adder and a flying fiery serpent, which, by the way, is the singular form of the word used in chapter 6, “seraphim.” In other words, the weakened Assyrian Empire will become strong again, as strong as a mighty, supernatural, venomous snake.
- This understanding of these verses is also supported by the end of verse 31, which warns that “smoke comes out of the north” (where the Assyrian invasion of Philistia would come from) and “there is no straggler in his ranks” (he has no weakness).
- 28-32 could be summarized, then, like this, “Rejoice not, O Philistia, that Assyria is currently weakened, for it will become even stronger than before. The poor and needy of my people, I will keep safe, but I will cause Assyria to bring famine and destruction (siege) to you. Wail and fear, Philistia, for your destruction is coming from the north. Our answer to your messengers is that we will trust in the Lord, not in you.”
- In short, Isaiah is strongly advising Hezekiah to not join this revolt. Philistia is marked for destruction, and Hezekiah is to trust the Lord, not an alliance with his neighbors.

15:1-16:14 - Third Oracle: Moab

- The third oracle, about Moab, is different from what we have read about Babylon, Assyria, and Philistia. In this oracle, This one is sympathetic and mourns over the destruction of Moab, grieving at their pride that led to their downfall.
- Moab was Judah’s neighbor to the east, across the Jordan River. The Moabites came from the line of Lot, Abraham’s nephew. They are referred to as the enemy of God’s people many times in the Old Testament, but they also were the people who sheltered David’s parents when he was fleeing from Saul. This is probably because his great grandmother, Ruth, was from Moab.
- Both Moab and Israel, however, claimed the land of Ammon, and this became a source of great hostility. They also had many other land disputes and battles over the years, and it seems that, at this point in history, Judah considered some of Moab’s territory, especially in the north, to be an illegitimate occupation, as it was land that God had promised to his people.
- Here in chapters 15-16, though, we see lament over the fall of Moab, the fall of those related to God’s people.
- In chapter 15, we read of a sudden disaster that will reduce the nation to refugees. Of this disaster, we read in 15:5, “My heart cries out for Moab” and, in 16:9-11, “I weep...I drench you with my tears”
- Throughout this chapter locations throughout the territory of Moab are named, beginning with their main center of power in the south and moving northward. Following the course of the refugees, though, it seems that the destruction started in the north and moved south, with people fleeing south away from it. This would match an invasion by Assyria, which would come from the north.
- In 16:1-5, we read what seems to be a cry and request for refuge from the people of Moab to Judah, but it is difficult to tell if this is an actual request or just the words being put in the mouth of Moab. It is also difficult to tell how much of this section is the request of the refugees and how much, if any, is the response of Isaiah/the Lord.
- Being that this is an oracle about something in the future, I think it is most natural to read 2-4a as the hypothetical words and request of a distraught Moab, with the few refugees left turning to Jerusalem for

help. In this case 4b-5 would be an implied positive response and promise that, one day, these things, this type of persecution, will all be gone.

- You can also read 1-5, though, as the Lord, through Isaiah, telling Moab to turn away from their high places and idols (15:2; 16:12) and turn to Zion, to the Lord and the Promise of the Messiah.
- Either way, we see, in classic Isaiah fashion, that the rest of chapter 16, starting in 6, mirrors chapter 15.
- The call to find hope in the Messiah found in 16:1-5 is surrounded by a lament ending with a warning both before it in 15 and after it in 16:6-14. In the rest of 16, we read that Moab is being judged for its pride. Every resource it puts its pride in will be destroyed. In 12, we read that Moab will go to their high places, their gods, and pray and weary themselves, but will not prevail. Their “gods” will not help them (reminds me of the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal).
- In 13-14, we read that this destruction of Moab will happen in just 3 years and that the remnant of their people will be “few and feeble.”
- Their pride and refusal to turn to God will lead to their destruction. To the remnant, the refugees, God pleads in 16:1-5, “Put away your pride. Look to Zion. Put your hope in the Messiah.”

17:1-18:7 - Fourth Oracle: Damascus (Syria/Israel)

- The fourth oracle opens by saying that it concerns Damascus (Syria), but we quickly find out that Damascus is just the bridge to talking about Israel and the ultimate truth.
- Chronologically, the first half of this oracle must have been spoken by Isaiah much before the other ones, as Damascus was destroyed well before the death of Ahaz that we read about back in 14:28. It is likely included here as a lead in and proof of his point that he makes in the second half of the oracle.
- 17:1-3 swivels back and forth between Syria and Israel to make the point that they are destroyed together. Their alliance leads to their downfall.
- 17:4-11 then focuses entirely on Israel to say that Israel will be brought low. The idols they turned to will be seen as worthless as they come to terms with God in the midst of their destruction. They forgot God, their true Rock and Refuge and turned instead to the vine-branch of a stranger (alliance with Syria). They will find that this plant will only bring them grief and pain.
- 17:12-14 then transitions from the fate of Israel and Syria into a brief statement about God’s power over all nations to make the point that trust in anything other than God is worthless.
- The nations thunder and roar, but God simply rebukes them and they flee away. All who are opposed to God and his people will ultimately face his judgment. Judah doesn’t need to look to foreign powers and alliances. They need to look to God.
- He makes this point again in chapter 18 when a new proposition of alliance is brought to Judah.
- After opening with a reminder about the fate of Israel and Syria and their alliance, Isaiah now responds to messengers from “beyond the rivers of Cush.” Around the time Ahaz died, a Cushite, or Ethiopian, dynasty took over in Egypt and immediately began trying to form an anti-Assyrian alliance. This is likely the alliance that Philistia was trying to get Hezekiah to join at the end of chapter 14.
- Instead of simply telling them no, Isaiah would have them be his messengers to the world. He would have them tell all the inhabitants of the world to look to God and his timing, not to their own plans.
- God looks on from his dwelling and will act in judgment in his timing.
- This could possibly refer to the judgment that God will bring against Assyria, but, especially in light of verse 7 and how some of the wording in this chapter is very similar to wording in the book of Revelation, I think this refers to God’s ultimate final victory and judgment and how, one day, every knee will bow and tongue confess that he is Lord.

19:1-20:6 - Fifth Oracle: Egypt

- This thought of God’s judgment of the nations and how every nation, no matter how powerful, will one day bow the knee to him, perfectly transitions into the final oracle against Egypt.
- As I mentioned in the last chapter, Egypt was actively trying to get Hezekiah to join their alliance against Assyria, and we know from chapter 30-31 and 36-37 that trusting Egypt was a continual temptation for Hezekiah.
- In response to this temptation, Isaiah says that God will judge Egypt. They will fight against themselves, and their gods will give them no help or answers (1-4). The Nile, the lifeblood of Egypt, will dry up and her resources wither (5-10). Her princes, counselors, and wise men are foolish and confused (11-15).
- The five “in that day” statements of 16-25 tell that Egypt will one day fear the Lord and swear allegiance to him. They will turn to the Lord and worship him, and God will hear them and heal them. One day, in fact, not just Egypt but also Assyria will worship the Lord. Egypt, Israel, and Assyria will be connected and worship God together.
- Babel will be reversed and all people (Egypt & Assyria representing the ends of the earth) will worship God.
- Just like the prophecy against Babylon in the first oracle is supported by a more near-term prophecy about Assyria, so also this end-of-time prophecy about Egypt & Assyria (representing the world and all nations) is supported by a more near-term prophecy against Egypt in chapter 20.
- Sargon, the king of Assyria, sends his army to Ashdod, or Philistia, in response to the rebellion that Egypt had encouraged Philistia, Moab, and Edom to do. Ashdod was the leading city of this rebellion, which is why it was attacked. The leader of the rebellion fled to Egypt, but Egypt backed down from their promise of protection and gave him over to the Assyrian army.
- The Lord then has Isaiah walk naked and barefoot, the attire of a captive being led to exile, for three years as a visible sign and promise that Assyria would conquer Egypt. This prophecy was fulfilled in part about 10 years later then again more fully 30 years after that.
- In messages very similar to what Isaiah had told Ahaz about Assyria, he tells his son Hezekiah that Egypt is not to be trusted. Their wisdom and might is fleeting and worthless, they will turn on you, and they will fall to Assyria.

Conclusion

- In the five oracles of this first series, we have seen one consistent message: Put your trust in God, not in yourself or other nations.
- In the first oracle that we looked at last week, God told the people to not fear Babylon, for, though they would take them into exile, God will preserve his people and judge Babylon. This first oracle would also have been a warning for Hezekiah to not form an alliance with Babylon, which we see him do later.
- In the second oracle, Isaiah warns Hezekiah to not join the alliance of Philistia, Egypt, and others against Assyria but rather trust in the Lord.
- In the third oracle, Moab, another member of that alliance, is promised judgment for her pride and told to turn to the Lord.
- In the fourth oracle, Israel is judged for forsaking God and forming an alliance with Syria, and they both fall together. This judgment is broadened out in the second half of the oracle to say that God is more powerful than any nation. He will judge the enemies of God and his people in his timing, and, one day, even the most powerful nations will worship him. In other words, God is the true King in whom we should trust, not anyone else.

- The head conspirator of this alliance we keep talking about is addressed in the fifth and final oracle, Egypt. God promises judgment on Egypt and declares that the wisdom and revelation of their gods and wisemen is foolishness.
- In fact, an alliance with Egypt is foolish because, one day, God will judge them, and they will learn to fear and worship God.
- One day, God will bring unity and peace to Egypt, Assyria, and all of Israel. The whole earth will worship God together.
- The certainty of all these promises, both near and distant future, is shown in the very near promises of judgment against Assyria in 14:24-27, against Moab in 16:13-14, and against Egypt in 20:3-6.
- The consistent message we see through the five oracles of this first series is that faith is believing that God's promises will come true and acknowledging that his plan and timing is best.
- Alliances with Philistia and Egypt would have looked appealing on paper, but God, through Isaiah, repeatedly told Hezekiah not to trust in his own wisdom but in God's.
- As we wait for God's plan and timing in our lives, a measure of our faith is to ask ourselves whether or not we are willing to wait well.
- Do we wait in faith? Or are we willing to do things we know are not right or wise in God's eyes to get what we want or feel we need.
- If we feel the Holy Spirit prompting us away from a certain thing or choice, do we ignore him because we feel that we know better?
- The kings of Judah often refused to listen to Isaiah's counsel, choosing their own wisdom or the words of other, false prophets who claimed to have a word from the Lord that the king liked better.
- As we wait, are we willing to submit to wise counsel, or do we search for someone who will tell us what we want to hear?
- The Bible has a lot to say about patience and waiting for the Lord because God knows that it is hard.
- Waiting is difficult, and waiting well is even more difficult. We want to have answers. We want to feel that we have a sense of control in our lives or at least see the path ahead clearly, but we don't always have this.
- Sometimes, as many in Isaiah's day and even Isaiah himself, we may only see partial answers or fulfillments in our lifetime.
- As we wait, are we willing to take God at his word, to live faithfully right now in this moment wherever we are, and to trust that his plans are better than ours?

Isaiah 21-23

Second Series of Oracles: "The Valley of Vision"

Introduction

This week, we are going to look at the second series of five oracles, seen in chapters 21-23. Compared to the first series, this second series is much shorter, but it is much more complicated in this series to follow exactly what Isaiah is saying and what time period he is talking about. I will argue throughout these chapters that the oracles had a historical setting in the time of Isaiah and Hezekiah, but we will see that they also blend the future into this. Prophecies of the near future sit right against words that seem to look much farther into the future. Almost every commentator has a different opinion about how to take the details of these chapters due to many complications in the Hebrew and the many different historical periods that the words may fit, but I will be purposefully trying to focus more on the big picture of what is going on so that we do not get lost in the weeds.

Commentary

21:1-10 - The First Oracle: "The Wilderness of the Sea" (Babylon)

- This oracle concerns the fall of Babylon, but which fall, and why is it called "the wilderness (desert) of the sea" and not just "Babylon"?
- Babylon had successfully led two rebellions and become independent from the Assyrian Empire during two periods which cover many of the years that this oracle was possibly written.
- Each of these times of independence, though, ended with a defeat by Assyria, in 710 and in 702. This process was repeated again later with another independent period followed by another defeat in 689.
- They finally overthrew Assyria in 609 but were themselves overthrown by the Medo-Persian empire just seventy years later in 539. So, which "fallen is Babylon" is this oracle talking about?
- Being that Babylon led two successful, though temporary, rebellions during this time and based on the wording in these verses, I think it is reasonable to see this oracle as a warning against an alliance with Babylon due to the fact that their "victories" do not last long, and they will be destroyed.
- This is also likely why the oracle is called "the wilderness of the sea." Babylon was nicknamed "The Sealand" because of the southern portion's marshland where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers enter the Persian Gulf. Isaiah is saying that this "Sealand" is really a wilderness or desert that offers no hope.
- Isaiah is telling Hezekiah that putting trust in Babylon is to ally yourself with destruction. In fact, putting your trust in foreign powers rather than in God is to set yourself up for betrayal and destruction.
- Isaiah sees, in verse 1, that whirlwinds (destruction) are coming from the wilderness, from a terrible land. Starting in verse 2, though, what exactly this destruction is becomes a bit unclear. The wording is often ambiguous, and it isn't always clear who the speaker is for the different parts of this oracle.
- There seem to be 2 primary ways to read this oracle, both fitting very well to a period of history.
- The first way of reading concerns more near term events, likely referring to the defeat of Babylon by Assyria in 710 or 702, depending on when it was written (or possibly all three).
 - (1-4) In this reading, the traitor/destroyer of verse 2 is Assyria, and Elam and Media are called to defend Babylon against Assyria, or possibly join in alliance with Babylon against Assyria. Isaiah is horrified by the destruction he knows is about to happen. He longed for the twilight, or end, of Assyrian oppression, but he only gets this vision of destruction.
 - (5-10) - The allies against Assyria feast and drink and call the princes, or warriors, to prepare for battle. They party, unaware of the destruction they are about to face, for, through the imagery of a watchman, we are told that Babylon will fall. And what Isaiah is told and shown from the Lord,

he tells to the threshed and winnowed (crushed) people of Judah. Their hope in the power and alliance of Babylon against Assyria will fail.

- The second way to read this oracle concerns the future destruction of Babylon by the Medo-Persian Empire (her former allies) in 539.
 - (1-4) In this reading, the traitor/destroyer is Babylon, who sought allegiances with Judah during Hezekiah's time but later turned against, destroyed, and exiled Judah. Elam (the area of Persia) and Media attack and overthrow Babylon as the Medo-Persian Empire. Isaiah sees this destruction and is appalled at the scene. He longed for the twilight, or end, of Babylonian oppression of his people, but the sight of it actually happening causes him to tremble.
 - As Babylon's former allies, Medo-Persia is also a traitor/destroyer, so the statement in 2a may just be a general statement of truth about all nations.
 - (5-9) - "They" (probably referring to Babylon) are eating and drinking, partying, unaware of the destruction about to come. A call to arms is called, but it is too late, for the watchmen tells us that Babylon has fallen. (This reading sounds strikingly similar to the account of the sudden, surprise fall of Babylon that we read in Daniel 5 and that we know from history to be true.)
 - (10) In this reading the message given to the "crushed ones" of Judah would be a message of relief that their oppression by Babylon is over.
- Because the next two oracles seem to work together with this one, and the group of three ends with the promise of a near-future fulfillment, I think it is best to understand the first reading as how it would have been understood when this oracle was given, but I do not think we should be surprised at all that the future fulfillment of the fall of Babylon also fits the wording, for, in this 2nd and also in the 3rd group of oracles, the events of the future all seem to start blending together in Isaiah's sight.

21:11-12 - The Second Oracle: "Dumah" (Arabia & Edom - "silence")

- This ambiguity and multiple fulfillments also applies to the 2nd oracle concerning "Dumah."
- The title itself is again a bit puzzling and very likely purposefully has multiple meanings, for Dumah was the name of one of the sons of Ishmael and was the name of an oasis town in north central Arabia. The word, though, also means "silence" and sounds a bit like the word "Edom" in Hebrew.
- That Seir (Edom) is mentioned in the first line as where the call is coming "*from*" seems to imply that Edom is asking the watchman (Isaiah) for news about another place (most likely Dumah).
- Dumah stood at a intersection of trade routes, with the western route going through Edom; so, the fate of Dumah would be a concern to Edom both for trade and communication with those to the east, especially since it would cut off communication with Babylon as they seek to form an alliance against Assyria.
- Edom asks the watchman "what time of night?" The real question here is "When will morning come?"
- The answer of the watchman is incredibly unhelpful. His response can be taken multiple ways, but the primary ways seem to be either that "morning will come but the night is here (first?), so keep waiting and inquiring for the morning" or that "morning will come, but it won't last long because the night is right behind it, so come back again (during the next night)."
- Either way, we know from history that multiple Assyrian kings led campaigns into northern Arabia in 715 and 703, with Sennacherib conquering all the way to Dumah, and we know that Edom was a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire during the times of Ahaz and Hezekiah.
- When you combine this with the fact that the "watchman" theme seems to connect this oracle with the oracle against Babylon, I think the message is that Edom is looking to Dumah for news and hope about Babylon, but Babylon has fallen and Dumah has fallen. If you are looking for a "morning," or hope, from either of these two places, you might get a bit of daylight, but the night is close behind.

- This fits well with the meaning of Dumah as “silence,” especially since the word “dumah” usually seems to refer to the silence of death. Edom looks for hope, but they are told that there is yet more night.

21:13-17 - The Third Oracle: Arabia (“night/wasteland”?)

- The themes of judgment, night, and lack of hope, bring us into the third oracle, this one about Arabia.
- There is a little debate about the title “Arabia,” and there is a chance that it might be better translated as “night” or “wasteland,” which would fit the dark and gloomy theme of these oracles, but all the places in the oracle are in Arabia, so it is certainly about Arabia, possibly with a double-meaning.
- The caravans and people from the city of Dedan will flee to the oasis city of Temah.
- Both of these places are in the region of Kedar (16-17) and stand for the powerful group of northern Arabian tribes. The northern tribes of Arabia will be crushed within a year (16) and become refugees.
- In the three oracles of this chapter, then, we see that Babylon, Arabia, and Edom are all shown to be tied to coming destruction and hopelessness. There might be a glimmer of hope, but it won’t last long.
- I think that these first 3 oracles all work together and were likely all given around the same time, either 716, when Hezekiah started to rule on his own, or around 704. Both of these times fit well, as they both had alliances offered to Hezekiah by these countries that were put down by Assyria.

22:1-25 - The Fourth Oracle: “The Valley of Vision” (Jerusalem)

- Hezekiah’s doomed desire to join this alliance leads perfectly into the sarcastic title of the fourth oracle.
- We are told this vision concerns the “valley of vision,” and we quickly find out that it is about Jerusalem and her severe *lack* of vision.
- From the names in vv. 15-25 and what we read about these men later in chapter 36, it seems likely that this oracle was given sometime before the siege of Jerusalem by Assyria in 701 and that the fate of these men serves as an intermediate fulfillment of the oracle, as we have seen in other oracles as well, but the content of verses 1-14 makes it difficult to tell what specific time period is being talked about.
- 1-8a and 12-14 seem to mirror each other in many ways, and both seem to talk about the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586. But 8b-11 matches very closely with things we read about from Hezekiah’s preparation for the Assyrian siege in 2 Chron. 32.
- It seems most likely that the events of Isaiah’s time and the later fall of Jerusalem to Babylon are both being discussed in a blended way and that the point of the oracle is a general truth
- 1-8a and 12-14 have many points of comparison and both basically boil down to this: “Why are you partying when you ought to be weeping and repenting? Your destruction is coming, and you refuse to turn back to God. He has taken away your covering (8a), and your sin will not be atoned for (14).”
- Notice how this partying in the face of destruction matches the oracle against Babylon in 21. Jerusalem has become just like Babylon. (In fact, there are many similarities between the 2 oracles.)
- Even in the face of destruction, the people refuse to turn back to God.
- Between these two sections (1-8a & 12-14), this truth is shown in an example from Hezekiah’s time. What we read in 8b-11 are the preparation that Hezekiah and the people took in preparation for the siege by Assyria in 701. They “looked” and “saw” the preparations they needed to make, but they “did not *look* to him who did it, or *see* him who planned it long ago (God).”
- In 2 Chron. 32, we read that Hezekiah actually did turn to God at this time, which is why God delivered the city. That Isaiah does not mention this shows that he is pointing at the greater truth and pattern of the rejection of God by the leadership and people and their refusal to look to him and return to him.
- I believe this is also why, in chapters 36-39, we will see that the narrative does not follow chronological order, and the failure of Hezekiah closes the narrative. Repentance, sadly, is the exception, not the rule.
- This theme of self-reliance and rejection of God is reinforced yet again in verses 15-25.

- In these verses, Shebna, who is effectively the prime minister of Jerusalem, is called but a “steward” by God and shown to be a very poor one at that. The word “here” is used 3 times in verse 16 to make the point that Shebna is not where he is supposed to be. He is looking to himself and the memorial he is making for his name when he ought to be looking after the people.
- In 17-19, the promise of his demotion is put in terms of exile, destruction, and humiliation. We will see in chapter 36 that, just as we read here, Shebna is demoted and his job is given to Eliakim.
- We see in chapter 36 that Shebna is still on staff as a secretary, so I think that the exile language is because this part of the oracle, just like the first half, blends the near and far future, and Shebna and Eliakim are representative of the people, who will eventually be exiled.
- Eliakim will replace him and do well for a while, but we see that he will also be cut down and fall (25).
- The story of Shebna and Eliakim mirrors the story of the people, Ahaz was a poor leader and was replaced by Hezekiah, who did well for a while but also eventually turned away from the Lord.
- The mount of Jerusalem has turned herself into a valley that completely lacks vision.

23:1-18 - The Fifth Oracle: Tyre

- This second series of oracles comes to a close with an oracle against Tyre, and, just like the first series ended with a promise of Assyria, Egypt, and Israel worshiping together, so this series seems to end with a promise that even the wealth of Tyre will be holy to the Lord.
- As with all of these oracles in this series, the timing of the oracle is a bit tricky, and it is very likely that this oracle points both to the near and far future as well, especially since some of the language of this oracle is used against the final Babylon in Rev. 18 (Babylon & Tyre are blended together in Rev.).
- Tyre was a major center for trade and commerce. Babylon had glory and strength, but Tyre had wealth.
- Tyre also had natural protection, with a fortress city on an island just off the coast.
- To the Jerusalem Isaiah is telling not to trust in herself and her own resources but to look to God, Isaiah closes this series of oracles by prophesying that even the great Tyre cannot trust her own resources.
- To the Jerusalem who keeps looking to alliances to save her—surely with Tyre being part of these talks in alliances with Babylon—God again promises that this will not work.
- We also read of “70 years” in 15-18 that will end with the wealth of Tyre being “holy to the Lord,” and, indeed, Tyre was constantly being attacked and subdued to various degrees for the next 70 years until around the time of Josiah when they again had some relief from foreign powers for a while and had trading relations with Jerusalem.
- They had another time of decline for about 70 years during the Babylonian empire that ended when the Persian empire conquered Babylon, and some of the wealth of Tyre was used to rebuild the temple.
- I think, though, that this oracle also points to a future reality. Just as some of the wording of this chapter is seen later in Revelation 18 in the lament of the people of the world at the fall of Babylon, so also this reversal and the wealth of Tyre being holy to the Lord points forward to the nations one day turning to him just like we saw in the first series of oracles that Egypt and Assyria would one day turn to God.

Conclusion

Through these oracles, Isaiah, likely speaking to Hezekiah at the time he is looking to the alliance with Babylon, is saying, again and again, you are looking in the wrong place for your security. You are supposed to be a mountain of vision, but you have become a valley that lacks vision. All of these nations that you are looking to with this alliance will fall. You think you can trust your own wisdom and resources? Tyre can't even trust hers! Where you are looking for light and hope, you will only find darkness, wilderness, silence, night, and destruction, for your “vision” is really blindness.

The promise of God to Isaiah about the people's reaction to his ministry is coming true right in front of him. They have become like Babylon and like Tyre, but, one day, God will bring a judgment and a healing that will cause even those who had formerly placed their trust in themselves to place their trust in him, to call on his name and use the resources that they once placed their hope in and used selfishly for God's purposes. They and everything they have will be "holy to the Lord."

We are not the nation of Judah considering alliances with other nations against the Assyrian Empire. We are not tempted to join the vision and power of Babylon or the wealth of Tyre. We do not face God's promise of judgment in exile to Babylon for our rejection of him. In fact, I think most of us would say we are more in the position of Isaiah, trying to be faithful to God as we see our world turning away from him.

This theme of vision and perspective that we have seen throughout these oracles, though, is a needed reminder to us to ask ourselves if we are looking through God's eyes for our daily decisions or through the eyes of the world or our own sinful desires. Hezekiah surely had Isaiah repeatedly giving him God's Word and telling him to look to God, and Hezekiah did for a while, but then, at the end of his life, he let his pride turn his eyes away from God. Hezekiah did not stay grounded in the Word of God.

Do we? Today, we have not just Isaiah, but God's entire Bible, 66 books, repeatedly giving us God's Word and telling us to look to him. Do we? Do we let Babylon and Tyre, the power, wealth, and pleasures that the world offers, blind our vision?

One of the easiest ways for us to examine ourselves is to remember that we are told that the world will know we are his disciples by our love. Do we let our desire to feel like we are in control, that we have a sense of power, or that we are right stop us from being loving in how we talk to or about others, even when we disagree with them, even when we disagree with them strongly? Do we let these desires cause us to talk or act in angry, unloving ways with our spouse, our friends, our co-workers, our kids, or anyone else? Do we let our need to feel secure in our money stop us from acts of generosity and love that we are really able to do?

We have talked a lot about military alliances these last few chapters, but, if you go back to chapters 1-5, the reason for God's judgment on his people came down to their pride, lack of love, and rejection of him and his word. They were still doing the motions of worship, but they did not have his heart.

Babylon—power, control, pride—and Tyre—wealth and pleasures—are alive and well today, and they are a fight that we all face, a city that we are constantly tempted to build in our hearts. They are two main roots of all kinds of evils that will pull us away from God and blind our vision.

Faith is keeping our vision, our eyes, our heart, set on God. Trusting that he is all we need and that what he has told us is best. Where we see a lack of love in our lives will likely reveal a part of our heart that is lacking faith and trust in what God has told us.

Isaiah 24-27

Third Series of Oracles: "A Tale of Two Cities"

Introduction

We have now reached the "finale" of the oracles, chapters 24-27. The first two series, 13-20 and 21-23, gave many particular statements and prophecies about the nations and God's people, some concerning the very near future and some a bit farther out into the future. Here, though, in 24-27, Isaiah concludes the oracles by looking to the end of time with broad, general statements about God's lordship of the earth and his final worldwide triumph. He does this by taking the themes and truths that have been presented in the first two series and showing where they will lead to in the Last Day.

As he concludes these oracles, Isaiah wants to make it plain that it is not God who reacts to the nations, but the nations who respond to God. This is the finale of Isaiah's repeated message that Judah's hope is not in the nations, not in human strength, resources, or alliances. They will wither away in a moment under God's blast. Rather, Judah's hope is in the Lord, who is the master of the nations. This theme in the finale is developed through two major contrasts. There is the contrast between the City of Man and the City of God. The one is cast down, forsaken, and destroyed. The other is a place of security, abundance, and life. And there is also a contrast in song. In the city of chaos the drunken revelry which was once there is now silent. In its place, there comes from the ends of the earth the song of the redeemed, a song about a God who is strong enough to save the helpless and compassionate enough to redeem the sinful.

In these chapters, we do not see five headers as we have in the first two sections, but there are five fairly distinct literary units that continue and culminate the themes and pattern of the previous two series. The five sections of this chapter, though, blend into each other much more than the five sections of the previous two series, so I don't think we should be too strict about the divisions of the five sections.

Commentary

24:1-20 - Downfall of the City of Man (Babylon)

- Here, the specific nations of 13-23 are gathered up into a single whole. No longer is it Babylon or Damascus or Tyre or Philistia or Egypt being confronted by God; now it is the earth itself (repeated 17 times) which stands before the bar of judgment.
- The final "Babylon" has fallen. Her song is silenced.
- In 13:1-14:27, God promised that Babylon would fall in words that seemed to apply to the actual Babylonian empire but also to the end of time and all enemies of God. In 21:1-10, we read "Babylon is fallen" in words that seemed to apply to the multiple defeats of the Babylonian empire. Here, the themes of chapters 13-14 return as we read not of Babylon, but of "the earth," "the wasted city," and "the nations" as all people and nations, no matter how powerful, face God's judgment.
- This judgment here in chapter 24 is framed in terms of God's judgment of the flood in Gen. 6-9 and God's judgment on the people at the tower of Babel in Gen. 11. The result is that the "city of man" (the new tower of Babel that has become an entire city spread throughout the world) will become "wasted" and "broken down" (10).
 - In v. 18, we see that the "windows of heaven are opened," just like in the Flood account in Gen. 7:11. The repetition of the ideas of desolation and emptiness in this chapter also bring the flood to mind, and the mention of the "everlasting covenant" with the world (5) brings to mind the everlasting covenant of the rainbow mentioned in Gen. 9:16.

- The use of the word “scatter” in 24:1 brings the tower of Babel story into this judgment as well, and we already talked in chapter 13 about the connection between Babylon and the “city of man” and the tower of Babel. Mankind’s rejection of God and God’s Word is judged.
- The word “wasted” is actually the same word used in Gen. 1:2 and translated there as “without form.” The judgment on the city will cause it to be as the earth before God’s acts of creation.
- So, then, this judgment will be as extensive as the flood, as direct as God’s judgment at Babel, and it will cause the earth to be ready to be remade like a new creation.
- In the midst of this destruction, as the song of the city is silenced, we read in 14-16a the song of the redeemed (possibly the olives and grapes mentioned in 13, but the Hebrew is unclear). Either way, people from all over the earth give glory and worship to God, “the Righteous One,” who is bringing an end to all transgression and rebellion through this worldwide judgment.
- In vv. 16-20, though, we read that Isaiah is unable to rejoice in the face of this destruction that he sees. In words similar to his reaction to seeing the Lord in chapter 6, he exclaims, “I waste away. Woe is me!”
- He sees the destruction that is to come, and he sees the betrayals and deceptions, the pain, that will continue until that day. In desperation he cries out to the “inhabitant of the earth.” “Terror and the pit and the snare are upon you! There is no escaping God’s judgment!!” For, in the words of 18-20 he lays out the impossibility of escape.
- In effect, the “Woe is me!” of chapter 6 turns into “Woe is you! (if you do not repent).”

24:21-23 - “The Lord of Hosts Reigns”

- The next verse, 24:21, begins the next section (24:21-23) and also begins a series of “in that day” phrases that carries through the rest of this series.
- This 2nd section in this series also continues the theme of timing seen in the 2nd section of each of the three series.
- In 14:28-32 (1st series), Philistia sought to bring about an alliance and rebel against Assyria when they felt the timing was right, but God told them that they were completely mistaken. In 21:11-12 (second series), Edom inquired of the watchman, “What time of the night? When will morning come?” Here in 24:21-23, we see the arrival of the Lord’s timing.
- “On that day” (In God’s timing), the Lord will punish the host of heaven and the kings of earth—rebels, both human and angelic—in their respective fields. He will defeat them on their own turf.
- “They will be gathered together as prisoners into a pit.”
- We then read that “they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.”
- Because this wording purposefully mirrors what just came before, with the repetition of “prison/prisoners,” “many days/on that day,” and “punished/punish,” it is unclear if it is meant that they will be imprisoned, shut up for many days, then punished, or if the second half is just repeating the first half to clarify that this “on that day” will be “after many days.”
 - The concept of a pit of imprisonment is developed much further in Revelation, but that is not something that we have time for today.
- Either way, all rebellion will be put down, and the Lord will reign. The sun and moon, often the highest gods of the surrounding cultures, will be ashamed and acknowledge that He alone is Lord.
- He will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and his “glory will be before his elders.”
- This is “coronation” language, and this is language that is echoed and expanded in Rev. 4-5.
- And, just like we see in Rev. 4-5, so here we see in the next verse (25:1) that the song of 24:14-16 picks up again and will continue to break into the unfolding events of “that day.”

25:1-12 - The Great Banquet

- This song is seen in 25:1-5 and again in verse 9 at God's great banquet, when the humble and faithful are exalted, the prideful are made low, and death is swallowed up forever.
- As the third section, chapter 25 continues the theme of refugees (15-16 - Moab, 21:13-17 - Arabia), of helping those who are poor and needy, of looking to God to one day right all wrongs, and brings this theme to its conclusion. The hope of chapter 16 becomes a reality in the verses of this chapter, as the faithful, just, and righteous King ends all oppression.
- In fact, the words of 16:3-5 find their fulfillment here in 25. In 16, we read,
 - "Give counsel; grant justice; make your shade like night at the height of noon; shelter the outcasts; do not reveal the fugitive; let the outcasts of Moab sojourn among you; be a shelter to them from the destroyer. When the oppressor is no more, and destruction has ceased, and he who tramples underfoot has vanished from the land, then a throne will be established in steadfast love, and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David one who judges and seeks justice and is swift to do righteousness."
 - I don't have time to show all of them, but almost every phrase of these verses finds a parallel in this chapter.
- We talked in chapter 16 about how 16:3-5 is probably best read as a plea for Moab to turn from her pride to God. We also saw in 22:13-17 that the people of Arabia looked to their own resources but were promised destruction.
- Now, here in 25, we see that the Lord who has always been with his people in their trouble, will one day end all troubles, oppression, pain, tears, and even death itself.
- 1 - His plans "formed of old" are faithful and sure.
- 2-3 - He will humble the great city, and even that city and its strong people will bow the knee to him.
 - "People" and "cities" of 3 are actually singular, referring to the city of man.
- 4-5 - God has always been a stronghold to the poor and needy. The oppressor, the enemies of God, will not ultimately prevail. (end of section of song of praise)
- 6-8 - One day, God will provide for all peoples, from all nations, a banquet and a place of peace for those who have placed their trust in him and waited for him. He will swallow up death, wipe away every tear, and take away all reproach.
- 9 - It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God. We have waited for him. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." (another interjection of a song of praise)
- 10-12 - The prideful, though, represented by Moab, will be brought low and will not be invited to this banquet.

26:1-21 - The Song of Judah

- In response to this, we see yet another song that begins chapter 26. The quotation marks in the ESV have this song going through verse 6, but some see it as the whole chapter. The reason for the confusion is that the song seems to keep going back and forth between the present and the future.
- Another reason for the confusion is that 1-6 seems to be directly responding to chapter 25, whereas the rest of 26 does not have as much direct relation.
 - The walls and bulwarks of the strong city of God are set up (26:1) while the walls of the city of man are brought down (25:12).
 - The repetition of "lay low," "dust," and "trample" match chapter 25 and show that the pride of Moab was simply being used as a picture for the prideful city of man that God will bring down.
- As the fourth section in this series, this chapter completes the theme of the choices of God's people. In 17-18, the northern tribes placed their trust in their alliance with Syria. In 22, Judah placed her trust in

her own self-sufficiency, refusing to look to God even as the city crumbles. Here, in 26, the people are now perfected as people of faith enjoying peace within the strong city, their mind “stayed on” God.

- The chapter, as a whole, is an encouragement for Judah to keep faith with, or trust in, God, who has always kept faith with Judah.
- We see this theme as soon as verses 2-4: “Open the gates, that the righteous nation that **keeps faith** may enter in. You keep him in perfect peace whose mind **is stayed** on you, because he **trusts** in you. **Trust** in the Lord **forever**, for the Lord God is an everlasting **rock (unchanging and trustworthy).**”
- In 5-6, we see the great reversal that will happen on that day: the seemingly powerful ones who oppose God will be brought low, and the poor and needy who trust God will be exalted.
- Verses 7-11 dwell more on the present and read like a proverb.
 - The word “judgments” is probably best understood as discipline. God directs the path of the righteous through his teachings and discipline. We are to wait for him, seek him, and desire him, as he leads us (7-9a).
 - God’s judgment, or discipline, is also intended to teach and humble the wicked. The inhabitants of the world learn righteousness through God’s discipline. In the “land of uprightness,” or “land of ease,” they do not see or feel a need for God (9b-10).
 - This sounds a lot like when Jesus said “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.”
 - Your hand is lifted, but they do not see it (11a). The “let them see” we read next is probably better translated as “they will see.” Those who refuse to see, acknowledge, and worship God will be ashamed “on that day,” and they will be consumed.
- 12-26, the rest of the chapter, dwells on the theme of our dependance on God.
 - “You will ordain (establish) peace for us, for you have indeed done for us all our works” (12) sums up the rest of this chapter.
 - 13-15 focuses on how God has protected his people. Many “lords” have ruled over them, but God has always brought those “lords” down and preserved his people.
 - 16-21 focuses on how God will one day fully deliver his people and punish all wickedness.
 - 16-18 amounts to an admission that they cannot deliver themselves or bring about any deliverance. No enemy will fall through their own strength.
 - 19 interjects with a shout of praise for the hope of the bodily resurrection (one of the only OT verses to do so), when the people of God will be brought back to life to be with God.
 - Notice how this contrasts 14 and the fate of the enemies of God.
 - 20-21 then finish this statement by looking to the day of judgment and combining the ideas of protection and deliverance that were just discussed.
 - In wording similar to Noah and his family being shut inside the ark and the people hiding in their homes during the final plague, God’s people are protected while God’s fury passes by (another allusion to the Egyptian plagues).
 - Just as he always has, God will protect and deliver his people in one final act of judgment.

27:1-13 - A Pleasant Vineyard

- The final section is chapter 27. In this section, God’s people and city appropriately turn into a “pleasant vineyard.” The vineyard of wild, useless grapes from chapter 5 that was punished and driven into exile is brought home and declared a “pleasant vineyard.”

- The theme of “one world, one people, and one God” seen in the final section of each series concludes here in chapter 27. In chapter 19, we saw that even Assyria and Egypt will one day worship God, and, in 23, we saw that even the wealth of Tyre will one day be used in worship of God. Here, in 27, we return to the Egypt/Assyria motif as we see God’s “pleasant vineyard” gathered.
- This is made possible because of the victory of God that we read about in 27:1: God slays the Leviathan/serpent/dragon. The three adjectives of God’s sword (hard, great, and strong) meet the three names of his enemy (Leviathan/serpent/dragon) and slay him.
 - Leviathan/serpent/dragon imagery was common in the surrounding cultures for the agent(s) of chaos, fighting in opposition to the gods.
 - So here, the word for “serpent” is the same word for the serpent in the garden, and we see dragon/serpent/beast imagery repeatedly in Revelation.
 - The agent of chaos, the Leviathan, who is the Devil, “that ancient serpent” (Rev. 12:9; 20:2), the enemy of God’s people, will be defeated.
- 2-6 - Because of this victory, God’s people will become forever his “pleasant vineyard” under his watchful and tender care. He will no longer have any enemies he needs to protect them from. They will take root and blossom and fill the whole earth with fruit.
- 7-11 explains the vineyard imagery by saying that God did not strike his people like he did the other nations. He exiled and punished them as a means of discipline, to bring them back to himself. Through such judgment for the sake of cleansing, their guilt will be atoned for, and the full fruit of their atonement and removal of sin will be that they will finally break down every idol and fully worship God.
 - They will be cleansed and atoned, but, as we see in 10-11, the city of man, those who reject God, will become a wilderness that will receive no compassion or tenderness from God.
 - I am trying not to jump ahead to Christ too much as the book of Isaiah continues to build the promise of the Messiah, but, because this chapter is a bit confusing, I am just going to say that the ultimate fulfillment of this “judgment for the sake of removing guilt and providing atonement” is seen in the cross. In fact, his crucifixion “outside the city” was a sort of exile.
- 12-13 - In the final two verses of this series, we read that “in that day” God will gather his people “from the river Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt” (the boundaries of the promised land promised to Abraham in Gen. 15, here representing the gathering of all his people from wherever they are). A great trumpet will sound, and people from all nations will come to worship the Lord on his holy mountain.

Conclusion

There is a lot of end times stuff in these chapters that we can get distracted by as we try to figure out exactly what is meant and how it works together with other passages from the Bible, but I want us to leave with the same thought that Isaiah was trying to instill in the leaders and people of Judah. All of this end times stuff is part of the overall message of 13-27 that is a desperate, repeated plea from Isaiah to the people to trust in God. The words of 26:3-4 are the heart of this plea: “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.” In short, “your trust in him will not fail.” These visions of the future are meant to change our heart now. God gives us the end of the story so that we know we can trust him today. Babylon will fall. God’s timing will come and will be right. He will right all wrongs. God will establish in peace forever those who trust in him. And God will gather people from all tribes and tongues to himself in his forever family. Do you live like it? Do you rejoice in it? Do you plead with Isaiah for the “inhabitant of the earth” (24:17) to turn to God?

Isaiah 28-35

Six Woes: God's Sovereign Word

Introduction

Last week, we finished the three series of oracles that contained 15 total oracles spread out over 15 chapters. Today, we are going to look at 8 chapters that contain a series of 6 woes. The content of all of these 23 chapters now of oracles and woes boils down, though, to 1 repeated message: TRUST GOD. So, before we begin, I want to talk a bit about the elephant in the room: why all the repetition??

First, we have to remember again that what we are reading is a condensed version of Isaiah's decades of ministry pleading with the leaders and the people to trust God rather than military alliances or their own resources or cunning or plans. He had been told directly by God that the people would reject his message, but he was faithful to his calling and continued to prophesy.

Second, to better understand why Isaiah has to keep giving these messages to King Hezekiah we need to understand a bit of Hezekiah's history. Remember that Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, pledged his loyalty to Assyria and paid them to help him fight off his enemies? Well, when Assyria conquered the Northern Tribes of Israel, that brought the Assyrian empire closer to home than the people and his son, Hezekiah were comfortable with. During the last few years of Ahaz's life, Hezekiah co-ruled with him and agreed with the many leaders who wanted to start opposing Assyria. Once Ahaz died and Hezekiah started ruling on his own around 715, he began actively looking into alliances to try to rebel against Assyria. He made many spiritual reforms, and, by and large, was commended by God for his choices as king, but this was his constant area of struggle and temptation.

The third and final thing we need to remember is that most of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, was written to be *heard* not read or is a writing of something that was spoken, such as these oracles and woes. And some of what we read in the Bible was likely oral tradition before it was ever written down. At the time of its writing and for hundreds of years after that, the people would not have all had a copy of Isaiah in front of them like we do today. There would have been a few copies that the leaders and scribes would have had, and it would have been read to the people. When you are writing something that was originally spoken or will be spoken, you write it differently than how you would write it if it is going to be read. I manuscript my sermons and have to deal with this difference every week. I have to re-write things that are clear when I read them but not as clear when I hear them spoken. And the best way to emphasize something that will be spoken, especially something that will be spoken by different people over different periods of time, is to repeat the parts of what you write that are important. We remember better what we hear more. We also remember things that are different and surprising. Which is why the word order or presentation of ideas in Scripture is sometimes a bit confusing when we read it. Sometimes, simply slowing down and reading it out loud will help you understand a passage of the Bible a bit more (along with looking up words you don't understand).

To show this (and because what we are looking at today is almost a repeat of the theme of the oracles), I want to do something a bit different today. We are looking at eight chapters which are a series of six woes that give a building message, just like the oracles did. I am going to read them with a bit of explanation as we go. As I read these chapters in preparation for today, I was amazed how much simply reading it out loud and imagining how it might have been said helped me understand what was going on. Hopefully it is helpful to you as well. There is a reason that Isaiah is called the "Shakespeare of the Old Testament." His writing is beautiful, and hopefully I can help us see that yet again as we look at these chapters.

Commentary

Before we begin, though, I want to briefly introduce the series of six woes in chapters 28-35. The first “woe,” chapter 28, starts with a promise of the destruction of the northern kingdom but quickly shifts focus to promise the same destruction to the southern kingdom, as they are making the same choices. The first few verses were spoken before the fall of the northern tribes of Israel in 722, and there is a chance that some of the other woes were given around that time as well, but most commentators believe that most of the content of these chapters was given closer to 701, when Assyria marches against Hezekiah and Jerusalem for his rebellion against them and his allegiance with Egypt, which is explicitly mentioned in the opening verses of the narrative starting in chapter 36. The woe against Israel in the first few verses then, is likely best understood as a reuse of earlier material as an introduction for the written form of his message to Judah. The northern tribes turned to Syria and fell. Judah is turning to Egypt and is bringing on herself the same fate as Israel.

As always with Isaiah, you will notice that even when he is talking about near-term, specific events he cannot help but to start blending these events into the future, into “that day,” so that you start to wonder when he is actually talking about. This is his point again and again in all of these chapters that we have been looking at: the events that are in the present or near future are fulfillments and pictures of God’s faithfulness and a guarantee that he will bring about what he has promised in the final day as well.

We will see in these woes the promise that God will deliver Judah from Assyria, but it is also obvious that a greater work of revival is needed. This matches the narrative that follows in 36-39, where we will see that God does deliver Judah from Assyria, but then chapter 39 travels back in time to Hezekiah’s foolish alliance with Babylon so that the narrative ends with a reminder that a greater revival is needed.

One final note: The ESV translates the word for “Woe!” or “Alas!” as “Ah” in these verses, probably because “Woe!” or “Alas!” is more archaic, but I like the sound of “Woe,” so I will be using that. Whatever word you use, though, grief, alarm, sadness, and often—as here—a plea for the hearer to repent is intended.

Judgment on Ephraim and Jerusalem

28 Ah (*Woe! - I*), the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim (*Israel*),

and the fading flower of its glorious beauty,

which is on the head of the rich valley of those overcome with wine! (*Samaria, the capital city, was on a beautiful hill, and its city and walls looked like a crown or wreath covering that hill*)

2 Behold, the Lord has one who is mighty and strong;

like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest,

like a storm of mighty, overflowing waters,

he casts down to the earth with his hand.

3 The proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim

will be trodden underfoot;

4 and the fading flower of its glorious beauty,

which is on the head of the rich valley,

will be like a first-ripe fig before the summer:

when someone sees it, he swallows it

as soon as it is in his hand. (*Samaria destroyed quickly by Assyria*)

5 In that day (*Isaiah looks to the future when God will restore Israel*) the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory,

and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people, (*He will be what the city and its leaders failed to be*)

6 and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment,
and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate. *(He will be the opposite of the foolish leaders of Israel. He will be sober, just, strong, and faithful.)*

(7-13 then repeat and explain more what was said in 1-4)

7 These also *(the leaders of Israel)* reel with wine
and stagger with strong drink;
the priest and the prophet reel with strong drink,
they are swallowed by wine,
they stagger with strong drink,
they reel in vision,
they stumble in giving judgment.

8 For all tables are full of filthy vomit,
with no space left. *(They are "drunk" on pleasures of the flesh, and, because of this, their visions and judgments are like that of a drunk man, and everything that comes out of their mouth is as bad as vomit.)*

(He now quotes them as an example of their word vomit)

9 "To whom will he teach knowledge,
and to whom will he explain the message?

Those who are weaned from the milk,
those taken from the breast? *(Is he teaching babies?)*

10 For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
line upon line, line upon line,
here a little, there a little." *("What he says is like the gibberish of baby talk." The Hebrew sounds of this verse have the idea of "blah, blah, blah, gah, gah, gah," or "gibberish baby talk," as it is Hebrew words that are like half words that kind of make sense. They accuse Isaiah of giving simplistic, childish wisdom that they are too old and wise for.)*

(In response to them, he says...)

11 For by people of strange lips
and with a foreign tongue
the Lord will speak to this people,

12 to whom he has said,
"This is rest;

give rest to the weary;
and this is repose"; *(A very simple, "childish" message)*
yet they would not hear.

13 And the word of the Lord will be to them
precept upon precept, precept upon precept,
line upon line, line upon line,
here a little, there a little,

that they may go, and fall backward,
and be broken, and snared, and taken. *(The word of the Lord will be like gibberish, but this time it will be because foreigners have conquered them as punishment and discipline from the Lord.)*

A Cornerstone in Zion

(Isaiah now turns his attention to Judah, to Jerusalem)

14 Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers,
who rule this people in Jerusalem!

15 Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death,
and with Sheol we have an agreement,
when the overwhelming whip passes through
it will not come to us,

for we have made lies our refuge,
and in falsehood we have taken shelter”; *(This is obviously not what the people actually said. They thought their plans were wise. They thought entering an alliance with Egypt and the other nations was a good plan, but Isaiah calls it like it is. It is an alliance with death. They are relying on that which is completely false. Their hope will turn out to be a lie and their own destruction.)*

16 therefore thus says the Lord God,
“Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion,
a stone, a tested stone,

a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation:
‘Whoever believes will not be in haste.’

17 And I will make justice the line,
and righteousness the plumb line; *(You have made a refuge of lies and a shelter of falsehood, but I have laid a tested, sure, and precious cornerstone, measured with justice and righteousness, for the foundation of Zion. Here, this refers to God’s plans and trusting in him rather than their own plans, but we see in the New Testament that this cornerstone imagery of God’s plans and faithfulness to his people is fulfilled in Christ.)*

and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies,
and waters will overwhelm the shelter.” *(Your foundation that you have chosen will not stand.)*

18 Then your covenant with death will be annulled,
and your agreement with Sheol will not stand; *(This alliance you are relying on will fail you.)*
when the overwhelming scourge passes through,
you will be beaten down by it.

19 As often as it passes through it will take you;
for morning by morning it will pass through,
by day and by night;

and it will be sheer terror to understand the message. *(Through terror and destruction, you will see the truth of what I am saying.)*

20 For the bed is too short to stretch oneself on,
and the covering too narrow to wrap oneself in. *(The “bed” of this alliance will prove too short and the “blanket” too small. This alliance sounds good, but when you try to use it, it will be useless.)*

21 For the Lord will rise up as on Mount Perazim;
as in the Valley of Gibeon he will be roused; *(two places where God attacked the enemies of his people, the Philistines and the Canaanites)*

to do his deed—strange is his deed!
and to work his work—alien is his work! *(God will do a strange & foreign work: fight against his own people)*

22 Now therefore do not scoff,

lest your bonds be made strong;

for I have heard a decree of destruction

from the Lord God of hosts against the whole land. *(The scoffers are already “locked in” to their destruction because of their mockery of God, and unless they stop at once, they will have forged their chains so tightly that nothing can break them. The sin from which there is no return (“the unpardonable sin”) is not merely refusing to listen to God, but continuing to do so and making fun of his message and means of working. Ultimately such a person cannot even recognize the truth when it confronts him, like the Pharisees who called the work of the Holy Spirit the work of the Devil.)*

23 Give ear, and hear my voice;

give attention, and hear my speech.

24 Does he who plows for sowing plow continually?

Does he continually open and harrow his ground?

25 When he has leveled its surface,

does he not scatter dill, sow cumin,

and put in wheat in rows

and barley in its proper place,

and emmer as the border? *(You don't keep plowing, you prepare the ground, plant what you need, then let it start to grow.)*

26 For he is rightly instructed;

his God teaches him.

27 Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge,

nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin,

but dill is beaten out with a stick,

and cumin with a rod.

28 Does one crush grain for bread?

No, he does not thresh it forever;

when he drives his cart wheel over it

with his horses, he does not crush it. *(You don't thresh all crops in the same way. If you do, you will destroy some of them.)*

29 This also comes from the Lord of hosts;

he is wonderful in counsel

and excellent in wisdom. *(The point of these verses is that true wisdom and counsel comes from God. He knows the right way to do things and the right timing for things.)*

The Siege of Jerusalem

29 Ah (*Woe - 2*), Ariel, Ariel, (*altar hearth*)

the city where David encamped!

Add year to year;

let the feasts run their round. *(keep doing your pointless feasts and worship)*

2 Yet I will distress Ariel,

and there shall be moaning and lamentation, *(she will be moaning and lamentation)*

and she shall be to me like an Ariel. *(She, Jerusalem, will be my altar hearth, my sacrifice.)*

3 And I will encamp against you all around,
and will besiege you with towers
and I will raise siegeworks against you.

4 And you will be brought low; from the earth you shall speak,
and from the dust your speech will be bowed down;
your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost,
and from the dust your speech shall whisper.

(Here the tone turns. After bringing this promised threat and punishment, God will deliver his people.)

5 But the multitude of your foreign foes shall be like small dust,
and the multitude of the ruthless like passing chaff.

And in an instant, suddenly,

6 you will be visited by the Lord of hosts
with thunder and with earthquake and great noise,
with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.

7 And the multitude of all the nations that fight against Ariel,
all that fight against her and her stronghold and distress her,
shall be like a dream, a vision of the night.

8 As when a hungry man dreams, and behold, he is eating,
and awakes with his hunger not satisfied,
or as when a thirsty man dreams, and behold, he is drinking,
and awakes faint, with his thirst not quenched,
so shall the multitude of all the nations be
that fight against Mount Zion. *(God's deliverance will be as sudden as waking from a dream. We will see this in chapter 37.)*

9 Astonish yourselves and be astonished;
blind yourselves and be blind!

Be drunk, but not with wine;
stagger, but not with strong drink!

10 For the Lord has poured out upon you
a spirit of deep sleep,
and has closed your eyes (the prophets),
and covered your heads (the seers). *(God has withdrawn his hand and help from the people.)*

11 And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot, for it is sealed." 12 And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, "Read this," he says, "I cannot read." *(You see and hear what I am saying, but you can't, you won't, you refuse to understand. And God will no longer help you.)*

13 And the Lord said:
"Because this people draw near with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me,

and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, *(rather than a truth and reality in their heart)*
 14 therefore, behold, I will again
 do wonderful things with this people,
 with wonder upon wonder; *(I will work a new wonder.)*
 and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish,
 and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”

15 Ah *(Woe - 3)*, you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel,
 whose deeds are in the dark,
 and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?”

16 You turn things upside down!
 Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,
 that the thing made should say of its maker,
 “He did not make me”;
 or the thing formed say of him who formed it,
 “He has no understanding”? *(You seek to reverse how things are. You seek to be over God.)*

17 Is it not yet a very little while
 until Lebanon *(metaphorically referring to Judah/Israel)* shall be turned into a fruitful field,
 and the fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest?

18 In that day the deaf shall hear
 the words of a book,
 and out of their gloom and darkness
 the eyes of the blind shall see. *(This likely refers to the deafness and blindness of the people that will be reversed, and they will finally hear, see, and obey.)*

19 The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord,
 and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

20 For the ruthless shall come to nothing
 and the scoffer cease,
 and all who watch to do evil shall be cut off,

21 who by a word make a man out to be an offender,
 and lay a snare for him who reproves in the gate,
 and with an empty plea turn aside him who is in the right. *(The foolish leaders of Judah had things reversed, but one day, God will reverse their reversal and set things right, and the next few verses continue to talk about this final reversal.)*

22 Therefore thus says the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob:

“Jacob shall no more be ashamed,
 no more shall his face grow pale.

23 For when he sees his children,
 the work of my hands, in his midst,
 they will sanctify my name;
 they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob

and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.

24 And those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding,
and those who murmur will accept instruction.”

Do Not Go Down to Egypt

30 “Ah (*Woe - 4 - back to the present problem*), stubborn children,” declares the Lord,

“who carry out a plan, but not mine,
and who make an alliance, but not of my Spirit,
that they may add sin to sin; (*You made a foolish alliance without even asking for my guidance, adding sin to sin.*)

2 who set out to go down to Egypt,
without asking for my direction,
to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh
and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt!

3 Therefore shall the protection of Pharaoh turn to your shame,
and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt to your humiliation.

4 For though his officials are at Zoan
and his envoys reach Hanes, (*two central and powerful Egyptian cities*)

5 everyone comes to shame
through a people that cannot profit them,
that brings neither help nor profit,
but shame and disgrace.”

6 An oracle on the beasts of the Negeb. (*the land south of the Judah that you would have to travel through to get to Egypt, seen in the caravan language of the oracle*)

Through a land of trouble and anguish,
from where come the lioness and the lion,
the adder and the flying fiery serpent,
they carry their riches on the backs of donkeys,
and their treasures on the humps of camels,
to a people that cannot profit them.

7 Egypt’s help is worthless and empty;
therefore I have called her

“Rahab who sits still.” (*Not Rahab that helped the spies, but the name of a mythological sea serpent or dragon. In this case, one that looks powerful but does nothing: “sits still.”*)

A Rebellious People

8 And now, go, write it before them on a tablet
and inscribe it in a book,
that it may be for the time to come
as a witness forever.

9 For they are a rebellious people,
lying children,

children unwilling to hear
the instruction of the Lord;

10 who say to the seers, “Do not see,”
and to the prophets, “Do not prophesy to us what is right;
speak to us smooth things,
prophesy illusions,

11 leave the way, turn aside from the path,
let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.”

12 Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel,
“Because you despise this word
and trust in oppression and perverseness
and rely on them,

13 therefore this iniquity shall be to you
like a breach in a high wall, bulging out and about to collapse,
whose breaking comes suddenly, in an instant;

14 and its breaking is like that of a potter’s vessel
that is smashed so ruthlessly

that among its fragments not a shard is found
with which to take fire from the hearth,

or to dip up water out of the cistern.” *(Remember how the leaders had scoffed that God was not the Potter?...)*

15 For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel,

“In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.” *(The simple message of trusting and resting in God.)*

But you were unwilling,

16 and you said,

“No! We will flee upon horses”; *(We will get horses from Egypt!)*

therefore you shall flee away;

and, “We will ride upon swift steeds”;

therefore your pursuers shall be swift.

17 A thousand shall flee at the threat of one;

at the threat of five you shall flee,

till you are left

like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain,

like a signal on a hill. *(Like a lonely flagpole on a hill with no army around it.)*

The Lord Will Be Gracious

18 Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you,

and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. *(Due to their rejection, the Lord is delaying his grace until he is able to demonstrate it in a way that will obviously exalt him and prove his worthiness to be trusted.)*

For the Lord is a God of justice;

blessed are all those who wait for him.

(These verses then explain this concept of God waiting to show grace and mercy.)

19 For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you. 20 And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. 21 And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. 22 Then you will defile your carved idols overlaid with silver and your gold-plated metal images. You will scatter them as unclean things. You will say to them, "Be gone!" *(Though he brings affliction and discipline now, he stands ready to be gracious to you once you turn back to him. When you are finally willing to see and listen and cast aside your false gods, he will lead you.)*

23 And he will give rain for the seed with which you sow the ground, and bread, the produce of the ground, which will be rich and plenteous. In that day your livestock will graze in large pastures, 24 and the oxen and the donkeys that work the ground will eat seasoned fodder, which has been winnowed with shovel and fork. 25 And on every lofty mountain and every high hill *(where they had built high places of false worship)* there will be brooks running with water, in the day of the great slaughter, when the towers fall. 26 Moreover, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when the Lord binds up the brokenness of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow. *(All the blessings to the land that the gods of the other nations promised, God will provide in abundance.)*

(How will this happen?)

27 Behold, the name of the Lord comes from afar,
burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke;
his lips are full of fury,
and his tongue is like a devouring fire;

28 his breath is like an overflowing stream
that reaches up to the neck;
to sift the nations with the sieve of destruction,
and to place on the jaws of the peoples a bridle that leads astray.

(Remember how, in chapter 8, the Lord promised that Assyria would be like a flood that would come up the neck of Judah? Now this is reversed as God comes down in judgment on Assyria.)

29 You shall have a song as in the night when a holy feast is kept, and gladness of heart, as when one sets out to the sound of the flute to go to the mountain of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel. 30 And the Lord will cause his majestic voice to be heard and the descending blow of his arm to be seen, in furious anger and a flame of devouring fire, with a cloudburst and storm and hailstones. 31 The Assyrians will be terror-stricken at the voice of the Lord, when he strikes with his rod. 32 And every stroke of the appointed staff that the Lord lays on them will be to the sound of tambourines and lyres. Battling with brandished arm, he will fight with them. 33 For a burning place has long been prepared; indeed, for the king it is made ready, its pyre made deep and wide, with fire and wood in abundance; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of sulfur, kindles it.

(In light of all this...)

Woe to Those Who Go Down to Egypt

31 Woe (5) to those who go down to Egypt for help
and rely on horses,

who trust in chariots because they are many
and in horsemen because they are very strong,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel
or consult the Lord!

2 And yet he is wise and brings disaster;
he does not call back his words,
but will arise against the house of the evildoers (*Judah*)
and against the helpers (*Egypt*) of those who work iniquity. (*Judah*)

3 The Egyptians are man, and not God,
and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. (*Why are you looking to human help, when you could look to God?*)
When the Lord stretches out his hand,
the helper (*Egypt*) will stumble (*Egypt's help never came*), and he who is helped (*Judah*) will fall,
and they will all perish together.

4 For thus the Lord said to me,
“As a lion or a young lion growls over his prey,
and when a band of shepherds is called out against him
he is not terrified by their shouting
or daunted at their noise,
so the Lord of hosts will come down
to fight on Mount Zion and on its hill.

5 Like birds hovering, so the Lord of hosts
will protect Jerusalem;
he will protect and deliver it;
he will spare and rescue it.” (*Egypt will abandon and fail you, but God will not. He may bring discipline on you, but he is also the lion that protects and flies around you as a bird protecting its nest.*)

(*So...*)

6 Turn to him from whom people have deeply revolted, O children of Israel. (*Again, the simple message of “repent, turn back to God.”*) 7 For in that day everyone shall cast away his idols of silver and his idols of gold, which your hands have sinfully made for you.

(*When you repent...we will see in chapter 37 that Hezekiah asks Isaiah to intercede for him and the people*)

8 “And the Assyrian shall fall by a sword, not of man;
and a sword, not of man, shall devour him;
and he shall flee from the sword,
and his young men shall be put to forced labor.

9 His rock shall pass away in terror,
and his officers desert the standard in panic,”
declares the Lord, whose fire is in Zion,
and whose furnace is in Jerusalem.

A King Will Reign in Righteousness

(These next few verses give what could happen if the king, leaders, and people actually looked to God and ultimately points to Christ who is the righteous and just king who will establish a perfect government one day.)

32 Behold, a king will reign in righteousness,
and princes will rule in justice.

2 Each will be like a hiding place from the wind,
a shelter from the storm,

like streams of water in a dry place,
like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.

3 Then the eyes of those who see will not be closed,
and the ears of those who hear will give attention.

4 The heart of the hasty will understand and know,
and the tongue of the stammerers will hasten to speak distinctly.

5 The fool will no more be called noble,
nor the scoundrel said to be honorable.

6 For the fool speaks folly,
and his heart is busy with iniquity,
to practice ungodliness,
to utter error concerning the Lord,
to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied,
and to deprive the thirsty of drink.

7 As for the scoundrel—his devices are evil;
he plans wicked schemes
to ruin the poor with lying words,
even when the plea of the needy is right.

8 But he who is noble plans noble things,
and on noble things he stands.

(The call to repent now extends from the leaders to the people as well. It starts by addressing women but switches to all the people by 13.)

Complacent Women Warned of Disaster

9 Rise up, you women who are at ease, hear my voice;
you complacent daughters, give ear to my speech.

10 In little more than a year
you will shudder, you complacent women;
for the grape harvest fails,
the fruit harvest will not come.

11 Tremble, you women who are at ease,
shudder, you complacent ones;
strip, and make yourselves bare,
and tie sackcloth around your waist.

12 Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields,
for the fruitful vine,

13 for the soil of my people
growing up in thorns and briars,

yes, for all the joyous houses
in the exultant city.

14 For the palace is forsaken,
the populous city deserted;
the hill and the watchtower
will become dens forever,
a joy of wild donkeys,
a pasture of flocks;

15 until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high,
and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. *(This reversal and restoration is only accomplished through the
outpouring of God's Spirit. This is echoed in Joel 2 and again at Pentecost in Acts 2.)*

16 Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.

17 And the effect of righteousness will be peace,
and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.

18 My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,
in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.

*(These last two verses summarize what was just said: Jerusalem will face judgment, but, after repentance and
the work of the Spirit, there will be peace and abundance.)*

19 And it will hail when the forest falls down,
and the city will be utterly laid low.

20 Happy are you who sow beside all waters,
who let the feet of the ox and the donkey range free.

O Lord, Be Gracious to Us

33 Ah (*Woe - 6 - final woe*), you destroyer (*Assyria*),
who yourself have not been destroyed,
you traitor,
whom none has betrayed!

When you have ceased to destroy,
you will be destroyed;

and when you have finished betraying,
they will betray you. *(After Assyria serves God's purpose of judgment on his people, he will bring judgment on
them. The wording also applies to how Assyria will be overthrown one day.)*

(The people repent and turn to God in their distress, likely at the siege of Assyria.)

2 O Lord, be gracious to us; we wait for you.
Be our arm every morning,
our salvation in the time of trouble.

3 At the tumultuous noise peoples flee;
when you lift yourself up, nations are scattered,

4 and your spoil is gathered as the caterpillar gathers;

as locusts leap, it is leapt upon.

(Isaiah promises that God will act in deliverance.)

5 The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high;
he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness,

6 and he will be the stability of your times,
abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge;
the fear of the Lord is Zion's treasure.

(What was summarized in the first six verses is now expanded out further in the rest of the chapter, starting with the great distress of the people at the siege of the Assyrian empire of Jerusalem.)

7 Behold, their heroes cry in the streets; *(The warriors of Judah are terrified.)*

the envoys of peace weep bitterly. *(The envoys from Judah to Egypt have realized that Egypt will not help.)*

8 The highways lie waste;
the traveler ceases.

Covenants are broken; *(Egypt's promise of help is broken, and Assyria is attacking Jerusalem even though Hezekiah tried to apologize and pay back the tribute he owed.)*

cities are despised;

there is no regard for man.

9 The land mourns and languishes;
Lebanon is confounded and withers away;

Sharon is like a desert,
and Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves.

(God hears the distress of the people.)

10 "Now I will arise," says the Lord,
"now I will lift myself up;
now I will be exalted.

11 You conceive chaff; you give birth to stubble;
your breath is a fire that will consume you.

12 And the peoples will be as if burned to lime,
like thorns cut down, that are burned in the fire." *(“Now I will rise. Your plans are worthless and will only lead to your destruction.”)*

13 Hear, you who are far off, what I have done;
and you who are near, acknowledge my might. *(Turn to me!)*

14 The sinners in Zion are afraid;
trembling has seized the godless:

“Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire? *(altar hearth..the idea being, “Who can stand before God?)*

Who among us can dwell with everlasting burnings?” *(The people are having their “woe is me” moment like Isaiah did in chapter 6.)*

15 He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly,
who despises the gain of oppressions,

who shakes his hands, lest they hold a bribe,
 who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed
 and shuts his eyes from looking on evil,

16 he will dwell on the heights;
 his place of defense will be the fortresses of rocks;
 his bread will be given him; his water will be sure. *(God answers, "Whoever has my heart can dwell with me.")*

17 Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty; *(Like Isaiah saw God as King in chapter 6.)*
 they will see a land that stretches afar.

18 Your heart will muse on the terror:
 "Where is he who counted, where is he who weighed the tribute?
 Where is he who counted the towers?"

19 You will see no more the insolent people,
 the people of an obscure speech that you cannot comprehend,
 stammering in a tongue that you cannot understand. *(The threat of Assyria will be gone after God acts.)*

20 Behold Zion, the city of our appointed feasts!
 Your eyes will see Jerusalem,
 an untroubled habitation, an immovable tent,
 whose stakes will never be plucked up,
 nor will any of its cords be broken.

21 But there the Lord in majesty will be for us
 a place of broad rivers and streams,
 where no galley with oars can go,
 nor majestic ship can pass.

22 For the Lord is our judge; the Lord is our lawgiver;
 the Lord is our king; he will save us. *(The destruction and fear of 7-9 is reversed through the deliverance that the Lord brings after the people look to him.)*

23 Your cords hang loose;
 they cannot hold the mast firm in its place
 or keep the sail spread out.

Then prey and spoil in abundance will be divided;
 even the lame will take the prey.

24 And no inhabitant will say, "I am sick";
 the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity.
(Even though you are like a broken ship, you will take the spoil of the Assyrians, when you repent and God forgives and delivers you.)

(This deliverance from Assyria and the judgment on them transitions into God's judgment against the nations.)

Judgment on the Nations

34 Draw near, O nations, to hear,
 and give attention, O peoples!

Let the earth hear, and all that fills it;
 the world, and all that comes from it.

2 For the Lord is enraged against all the nations,
and furious against all their host;
he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter.

3 Their slain shall be cast out,
and the stench of their corpses shall rise;
the mountains shall flow with their blood.

4 All the host of heaven shall rot away,
and the skies roll up like a scroll.

All their host shall fall,
as leaves fall from the vine,
like leaves falling from the fig tree. (*The "host of heaven" likely refers to the gods of the other nations to say that God will bring into judgment and cast down all who stand against him and all the gods they worship.*)

5 For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens;
behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom,
upon the people I have devoted to destruction. (*Edom came from Esau, the brother of Jacob. So Jacob would represent God's people, and Edom represents those opposed to God.*)

6 The Lord has a sword; it is sated with blood;
it is gorged with fat,
with the blood of lambs and goats,
with the fat of the kidneys of rams. (*The sword is filled with the offerings made by his people.*)

For the Lord has a sacrifice in Bozrah, (*Capital of Edom*)
a great slaughter in the land of Edom. (*The sacrifice is the judgment of those who opposed him. His people were his sacrifice as part of his discipline in 29:2. Now the enemies of God are the sacrifice in his judgment.*)

7 Wild oxen shall fall with them,
and young steers with the mighty bulls.

Their land shall drink its fill of blood,
and their soil shall be gorged with fat. (*sacrificial imagery*)

8 For the Lord has a day of vengeance,
a year of recompense for the cause of Zion.

9 And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch,
and her soil into sulfur;
her land shall become burning pitch.

10 Night and day it shall not be quenched;
its smoke shall go up forever.

From generation to generation it shall lie waste;
none shall pass through it forever and ever. (*The destruction that will come to Edom, or the enemies of God is put in terms of the destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah in Gen. and of the Lake of Fire in Rev.*)

11 But the hawk and the porcupine shall possess it, (*This goes back to imagery of the city of man being overthrown and destroyed and turned over to the plants and animals, uninhabited by people any longer.*)
the owl and the raven shall dwell in it.

He shall stretch the line of confusion over it,
and the plumb line of emptiness.

12 Its nobles—there is no one there to call it a kingdom,
and all its princes shall be nothing.

13 Thorns shall grow over its strongholds,
nettles and thistles in its fortresses.

It shall be the haunt of jackals,
an abode for ostriches.

14 And wild animals shall meet with hyenas;
the wild goat shall cry to his fellow;
indeed, there the night bird settles
and finds for herself a resting place.

15 There the owl nests and lays
and hatches and gathers her young in her shadow;
indeed, there the hawks are gathered,
each one with her mate.

16 Seek and read from the book of the Lord:
Not one of these shall be missing; *(God's words and promises will come true.)*
none shall be without her mate.

For the mouth of the Lord has commanded,
and his Spirit has gathered them.

17 He has cast the lot for them;
his hand has portioned it out to them with the line;
they shall possess it forever;
from generation to generation they shall dwell in it. *(No one can overturn what God has declared and judged.)*

The Ransomed Shall Return

35 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;
2 it shall blossom abundantly
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God. *(The judgment and destruction that God brought to his people and the land will be completely reversed when they see and dwell with God.)*

3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

4 Say to those who have an anxious heart,
“Be strong; fear not!

Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.

He will come and save you.”

(One day, God will judge all who oppose him and reward his people. One day all wrongs will be righted.)

(When this happens, on “that day,”...)

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

6 then shall the lame man leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. *(Jesus said he did these things as a fulfillment and sign that he was the Messiah. We think of a lot of this stuff as “end times” stuff, but showed that his work as the Messiah gave and continues to give us a foretaste of these things.)*

For waters break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

7 the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes. *(This is the exact opposite fate of what we read of Edom.)*

8 And a highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; *(In 33, as part of God’s judgment on his people, we read, “the highways lie waste.” Now the highway is there and is the Way of Holiness.)*

the unclean shall not pass over it.

It shall belong to those who walk on the way;
even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. *(All who walk it will be holy, and it will be easy to follow.)*

9 No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; *(There will be no more threats.)*

they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.

10 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return
and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

(The redeemed, those of faith, will come to be home with God forever and have everlasting joy. Sorrow and sighing will be no more.)

Isaiah 36-39

In whom do you trust?

Introduction

Before we begin today, I would like to apologize for how long my recent sermons have been. We have been working through some very long and complicated sections of Isaiah, and I know that the sermons have been longer than normal. I also know that we have meetings after today's service, the annual meeting next week, and fellowship meal two weeks later, so I will try to keep things shorter going forward if at all possible.

I also want to correct an error that I made in last week's introduction. I said that Hezekiah co-ruled with his father Ahaz for a few years due to Ahaz' skin disease. It was Uzziah, who had the skin disease, not Ahaz.

Hezekiah and Ahaz co-ruled after Ahaz had bribed Assyria to help him against Israel and Syria, which resulted in Assyria completely subjugating, though not yet destroying and exiling, Israel, turning them into a weakened, vassal state of Assyria. Hezekiah and many of the nobles and rulers in Judah didn't like this show of power by Assyria so close to their home, so they had Hezekiah become king with Ahaz technically still ruling, though basically in a forced early retirement. The northern tribes of Israel were then destroyed and exiled a few years later, and a new Egyptian dynasty started promising assistance to any nation who would rebel against Assyria shortly after that. Both of these events paved the way for Hezekiah and the rulers to start actively looking to alliances with Egypt and other nations after Ahaz died.

This historical context also brings us into our chapters for today, Isaiah 36-39. This is the largest narrative section in the book of Isaiah and covers the Assyrian invasion into Judah (36-37), Hezekiah's sickness and miraculous healing (38), and his foolish and prideful alliance with Babylon (39). These events are also found in a much shorter summary in 2 Chron. 32 (our Scripture reading) and also in 2 Kings 18:13-20:21, which is extremely close in content and in length to what we see here in Isaiah. The events are in the same order in all 3 accounts, which is actually surprising because, in all 3 accounts, they are out of chronological order. The invasion into Judah happened around 701, and Hezekiah's sickness & recovery and the arrival of the Babylonian envoys happened around 704 (or possibly around 711). Why do all three accounts end with Hezekiah's failure? This is something we will talk about as we work through the chapters. But first, a little background:

- ~716-715 - Ahaz passes away and Hezekiah begins to rule completely on his own
- 710 - Babylonian period of independence is brought to an end by Assyria. Judah does not seem to have been actively involved in this, as there is no record of them being punished (Ahaz & Hezekiah had been co-ruling when the period of Babylonian independence started)
- ~705-704 (or possibly ~712-711) - Hezekiah seeks alliances with Babylon and Egypt to help in rebellion against Assyria, and Babylon again begins a period of declaring independence from Assyria.
- ~703-702 - Babylonian rebellion put down (again) by Assyria.
 - This is why we just read about Egypt in Isaiah 36-39 and why Egypt was the main focus in chapters 28-35, the woes leading into this narrative. Hezekiah is hoping that Egypt will help him.
- 701 - Assyrian invasion into Judah begins.

Commentary - Isaiah 36-37 - The Assyrian Invasion into Judah - 701

36:1 - Assyrian Invasion

- After subduing Babylon, Sennacherib and the Assyrian army march against Judah.
- In 2 Kings 18:14-16, we see that Hezekiah pays Sennacherib tribute as a sign of repentance and submission. Sennacherib accepts the payment but also continues his campaign into Judah.

36:2-22 - The First Message from Sennacherib

- Sennacherib sends the Rabshakeh, or high-ranking officer, with a great army to give a message to Hezekiah: God will not protect them, just like the other gods have not protected the other nations.
- Notice how the Rabshakeh stands, by the way, “by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer’s Field” (36:2; 7:3), which is exactly where Ahaz stood when Isaiah confronted him about who he was going to trust: Assyria or God.
- Now, in the same spot, Ahaz’s son, Hezekiah, is put to the test. Who is he going to trust, Egypt or God?
- The Rabshakeh, ironically, also argues that trusting Egypt is foolish, but he also says this about God.
- Assyria knows about Hezekiah’s reforms and that he has destroyed all the high places and false idols (2 Chron. 31), and they claim that God has sent them against Judah in reaction to this destruction. (They are right that God sent them, but wrong about the reason.)
- The leaders asked the Rabshekah to speak in Aramaic rather than Hebrew so that the people on the wall wouldn’t understand the threats, but the Rabshakeh then gave a louder message to the people, telling them that they face death if they don’t surrender. After all, the gods of Samaria (Israel) didn’t save her.
- The leaders of Jerusalem give no answer, just as Hezekiah had ordered them not to.
- (Notice the names and titles of Eliakim and Shebna. The promises of Is. 22 have come true.)

37:1-7 - Hezekiah’s Response - He Asks Isaiah to Pray

- In response to the message from Assyria, Hezekiah asks Isaiah to pray to God. Isaiah promises that God will cause the king of Assyria to return to his own land and die there by the sword.

37:8 - The Messengers Return to Sennacherib

- The Rabshakeh then returns to Sennacherib (either by himself or with his army; it is unclear; his part of the army may have remained near Jerusalem waiting for their orders) and meets him at Libnah, since the siege of Lachish is over, and Sennacherib and the main part of the army have moved on to Libnah.

37:9a - News of the Egyptian “Help”

- While they are here, Sennacherib is told that the Egyptians are marching against them.
- This would have been to honor the alliance that had been formed between Judah and Egypt that the woes in the previous chapters had talked about. However, the Egyptian army that is sent, is led by the younger brother of the Pharaoh and is only a portion of Egypt’s army.
- Egyptian & Assyrian accounts confirm this battle took place at Eltekeh (Philistia) and that Assyria won.

37:9b-13 - The Second Message from Sennacherib

- In response to the news about the Egyptian forces, Sennacherib sends a message to Hezekiah that basically boils down to, “This changes nothing.” He tells Hezekiah that his God will not deliver him, just like the gods of the other kings Assyria conquered didn’t deliver them. He doesn’t even mention Egypt in this letter, probably to make the point of how easily he thinks he can dispatch Egypt’s “help.”

39:14-20 - Hezekiah’s Response - He Prays

- Rather than asking Isaiah to pray, this time Hezekiah himself goes to the temple to lay the letter from Sennacherib before the Lord and pray for deliverance. He asks for God to deliver Jerusalem and to demonstrate that he alone is God (sound a bit like the theme of the Exodus & David vs. Goliath?).

39:21-35 - God’s Response to Hezekiah

- In response to this prayer, God has Isaiah send a message to Hezekiah.
- The message, written as if to Sennacherib, basically says, “Will you mock me?? You think you have won all your victories through your own strength, but I planned this a long time ago and allowed you to do this. I know your every move and that you now rage against me and mock me. Because of your arrogance, I am going to humiliate you and turn you right back around to go back the way you came.”

- God then says he will give Hezekiah a sign, just like he gave Ahaz a sign. This time, though, the sign isn't something that will happen before God acts, but afterwards, to show the certainty that he will act. He says that, within 3 years, things will be back to normal and the crops will have recovered from the devastation caused by the Assyrian army. Notice both signs have to do with what/when the people eat.
- The message then ends by declaring again that God will make Sennacherib return to Assyria. He will not attack Jerusalem or even build up a siege mound against it. He, God, will do this for the sake of his name and for the sake of David and his line and God's promises to David.

39:36-38 - The Defeat of the Assyrian Army and the Death of Sennacherib

- We are then given three quick verses that show the fulfillment of God's promises.
- First, the Angel of the Lord (likely the 2nd Person of Yahweh, or Jesus, though we aren't given explicit details to confirm this besides that he is referred to as "the" angel, not "an" angel and that his actions here match thematically with other passages about "the Angel of the Lord" that do demonstrate this angel's divinity, but that is something we don't have time to trace here, but I did trace that all in Sunday School last summer)...anyway, the Angel of Lord, strikes down 185,000 in the Assyrian camp.
- Because of the lack of clarity about whether or not there currently was an army around Jerusalem, I think it is best to understand that the Angel went to the main Assyrian camp and killed 185,000 soldiers.
- Seeing this, Sennacherib retreats back to Assyria and does no further campaigns into the area.
- Sennacherib's death, the 2nd fulfillment, happened 20 years later but is mentioned here to continue the point that all of God's promises came true: Sennacherib heard a rumor (Egypt's coming), he retreats the way he came (after the death of the 185,000), and he dies "by the sword" (assassinated by his sons).
- This all seems historically phenomenal and almost unbelievable, but, event for event, you can read Egyptian, Assyrian, and later Greek historical records to confirm each event.
- There are different accounts and theories in the records about the sudden death of so many soldiers and retreat of Sennacherib, but this matches the fact that most countries, especially at this time, do not seek to keep accurate records of their defeats or describe the power of opposing gods in their records.
- We are also not told how the Angel struck down the 185,000, so he may have used "natural" means in a supernatural way, like we talked about a bit in the plagues of Egypt in our Exodus series.
- Either way, the Assyrian army retreats and Jerusalem is delivered. Sennacherib's own annals document that he conquered Lachish but make no mention of Jerusalem. They simply read that he had Hezekiah trapped "like a bird in a cage" but do not mention any siege ramps or destruction of Jerusalem, just like God had promised, though they mention siege ramps and go into great detail about other cities and victories. In fact, the annals make a big deal about the destruction of Lachish, and many believe this is because Sennacherib wasn't able to take Jerusalem. but he didn't want to make it look bad that he didn't.
- This battle may have been won, by the way, for Jerusalem, but Assyrian records confirm that Hezekiah still was a vassal king and continued to pay tribute to Assyria after this. He was simply spared the destruction that Sennacherib had intended as revenge for the alliance against him.

Chapter 38-39 - Hezekiah's Illness & Miraculous Recovery and the Babylonian Envoy

- Chapter 38 then describes Hezekiah's sickness and miraculous recovery. Verse 1 says "in those days," but verse 6 talks about the deliverance of the city that just happened in the previous chapters, and the opening verses of chapter 39 say that the envoys from Babylon came after they heard of the sickness; so, I think it is best to understand these events happening around 705-704, as Babylon is beginning a new period of independence and looking for allies.
- In 38, Hezekiah is very sick and is told by God, through Isaiah, that he will not recover.
- Hezekiah prays to God to remember all the good he has done, and he weeps bitterly.

- Isaiah, who had probably just left the room, is sent back to tell him that God has heard his prayer and will extend his life by 15 years and also deliver Jerusalem from Assyria.
- God then gives a sign that this will happen. The shadow of the sun on the steps/dial of Ahaz (probably an instrument for measuring time) is reversed by 10 steps. Just as Hezekiah is now further from his death, so the sun is now further from its setting (why it is 10 and not 15, I don't know).
- In 9-22, we read a psalm of Hezekiah, instructions from Isaiah, and a question from Hezekiah. These are out of chronological order on purpose. Hezekiah didn't ask for a sign after the sign was already given.
- The Psalm is included to compare Hezekiah again to David. Is Hezekiah the promised "son of David"?
- After Isaiah's instructions, Hezekiah asks for a sign, unlike Ahaz, who had refused to ask for a sign even after God had told him to ask for one. Is Hezekiah Ahaz's opposite? Is he the promised son? His life was just extended; so, is this a sign that he is the one who will sit on the throne of David forever? Because of his faithfulness and cry to God, God will deliver the city. Is Hezekiah the promised deliverer?
- All of these questions are answered with a resounding "No!" in chapter 39.
- In response to his recovery (and 2 Chron. 32:31 seems to indicate also in response to the sign of the sun's reversal), envoys from Babylon are sent with letters and a present from the king of Babylon (certainly also to talk about alliance against Assyria).
- Hezekiah gladly shows them all of his wealth, catering to his own pride and seeking an alliance that God has warned him against multiple times through Isaiah.
- When Isaiah asks him who they were and what they said, Hezekiah explains that they were from Babylon and that he showed them everything. In response to this, Isaiah gives a message from the Lord that one day, Babylon will take everything away from Jerusalem and exile Hezekiah's descendants.
- Hezekiah responds to this with, "The word of the Lord is good." For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my days." The great, the faithful, Hezekiah, who the text purposefully builds up as a possible Messiah, gives in to pride and foolishness and shows a disregard for the future of his own people. The Messiah he is not. Even this great "son of David" has failed. The line of David has failed. The people will go into exile. Is this the end? What do God's people need? Who is this promised one?

Conclusion & Application

These are answers we will look for as the book of Isaiah continues next week, but, to close today, I want to think about the chapters we just covered. These chapters purposefully have a depressing ending. One depressing message that I don't want you to hear, though, is that God defines you by your failures. The structure of these chapters ends the life of Hezekiah, as great and faithful as it was, with his greatest failure, even moving it purposefully out of chronological order to do so. The temptation to look to foreign alliances rather than God for trust and security was Hezekiah's greatest, most consistent temptation and his biggest failure. Ending the story this way, even after showing a victory in this area, can cause us to ask if this is how God sees us. If I have a consistent area of struggle in my life or a big failure, is that all God sees? Is that the end of my story?

No! This story is told this way to show our need for one greater than Hezekiah! The Old Testament highlights the failures of the human descendants of David to show the need for one who is human but also more: the need for one who is God and man, God in our flesh, a "son of David" who is able to do what we cannot do, be perfect and take our punishment on himself then raise himself up from the dead in victory over our real enemy sin and death. The deliverance of Jerusalem, of God's people, from Assyria through the faithfulness and intercession of Hezekiah cannot be the end of the story because that is not the ultimate act of deliverance that God's people need! Chapters 1-39 are written to show us that what we will read in 40-66 is the real solution. So, no, God doesn't define you by your failure but by Christ's victory if your faith is in him.

Isaiah 40:1-44:23

The Promises & Plans of God

Outline of Isaiah (Review)

- 1-5 - The Situation (The Preface):** the failure of Judah and the forfeiture of the promises?
6 - Isaiah's Atonement & Commission: the individual who stands for the community
7-39 - The Promise (The King): the failure of the Davidic king and the promise of the true David
40-55 - The Answer (The Servant): the sin of the people born by the sin-bearing Servant
56-66 - The End (The Conqueror): the call to live in obedience & righteousness, waiting for the final victory

Introduction

Last week, we looked at chapters 36-39, which was the final section of the first "book" or major division of the book of Isaiah, 1-39. The first book was "The Book of the King," which really starts in chapter 7, after the first 5 chapters of introduction, or background material, and Isaiah's commission in chapter 6. Chapter 7 opens this "book" with Ahaz and his failure of looking to Assyria rather than trusting in God. This was a bit expected, especially if you read about Ahaz elsewhere in the Bible and see that he was characterized by doing what was evil and looking to idols rather than God. Last week, though, we saw that "The Book of Kings" also closes with a failure that is a bit more surprising: Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, who is, by and large, characterized throughout the Bible by doing what is right, also failed by looking to Babylon rather than to God.

Chapter 39 purposefully closes "The Book of the King" with the failure of the line of David, the promise of exile to Babylon, and the promise that some of Hezekiah's sons would be taken into exile and become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. This threat to the line of David and to the promises is made explicit in 39:7 in Isaiah's message to Hezekiah: "And some of *your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father*, shall be taken away, and they shall be *eunuchs*..." Notice that it is repeated 3 times that the sons of Hezekiah, the sons of David's line, will be taken away and become eunuchs, unable to have children. Notice also, though, that it is specified that *some* will become eunuchs. There is hope for the line of David, hope for the promises, but this is a dire threat.

"The Book of the King," then, which contains promises of a future, perfect "son of David" scattered throughout the chapters, ends with a grave threat to these very promises. How, in light of this threat, will these promises be fulfilled? That is the question that this next section, "The Book of the Servant" (40-55), must answer. And it does so by doing more than answering just the question of the Babylonian exile, for that is not truly the greatest threat to the promises: the unfaithfulness, the rebellion, the sin, of the people is. These chapters give an answer to exile but they also give the answer that is needed even more: redemption from sin.

Outline of "The Book of the Servant" & 40:1-44:23

We will be working through this second book, "The Book of the Servant," in three sections:

- **40:1-44:23** - The Promises & Plans of God: dealing with exile and sin
- **44:24-48:22** - The First Act of Deliverance: deliverance from exile
- **49:1-55:13** - The Second Act of Deliverance: deliverance from sin.

Today's section, 40:1-44:23 is broken up into 2 major sections, each with 2 minor sections:

- **40:1-42:17** - The Promises of God
 - **40:1-41:20** - Comfort for God's People
 - **41:21-42:17** - Hope for the World
- **42:18-44:23** - The Plans of God

- **42:18-43:21** - Redemption from Bondage
- **43:22-44:23** - Redemption from Sin
 - (We will go a bit quicker through these 2 since they are unfolded in the next sections)

Commentary

40:1-42:17 - The Promises of God

- As we enter into chapter 40 and begin “The Book of the Servant,” we need to realize that we are leaving the events of Isaiah’s lifetime and switching to what is likely a different intended audience.
- Chapters 1-39 cover his call to ministry, his continued pleas to Ahaz and Hezekiah to trust God, and all the historical events of his lifetime that are contained in Isaiah. The prophecies, oracles, and woes of especially 7-39 were spoken to the people of his time for their circumstances. He grounded future prophecies in more near-term prophecies as he consistently called the people to trust in God.
- 40 and beyond look to the return from exile—which happens well beyond Isaiah’s time, to the work of “The Servant,” and to the end of the world. They are written as if to the future people of God in exile in Babylon to promise them deliverance from bondage, both their felt bondage and their heart bondage.
- Now, sometime after 701, as he arranges this book and purposefully puts chapters 38-39 out of chronological order to show that Hezekiah isn’t the one that the people should find their hope in (possibly while Hezekiah is still ruling), he, through God’s eyes, looks to the future and pleads with the people who are in exile, just like he pleaded with the people of his own day, to put their trust in God.
- He starts this plea with a series of promises and guarantees in 40:1-42:17. This section briefly introduces the plan of God to deliver his people from bondage and sin then contains a series of voices and guarantees that declare the certainty that God’s plans will come to pass.

40:1-41:20 - Comfort for God’s People

- As he looks to these future people, he meets them where they are, in their exile, and begins his message with “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare (hardship) is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.”
- These two short verses are a summary of what will follow in chapters 40-55.
- “Comfort, comfort” is a pair of plural verbs that introduces the three voices that will proclaim this message of comfort in verses 3-11.
- These voices, and the content of 40-55, will “speak tenderly,” or “speak to the heart,” of Jerusalem, of God’s people. And the content of this comfort is summarized in the three “that” statements of verse 2:
 - “That her warfare (hardship/exile) is over”
 - “That her iniquity (sin) is pardoned”
 - “That she has received from the Lord’s hand double (the double of, possibly meaning the matching punishment, or possibly “the match/solution,” meaning the payment) for all her sins”
- So, in other words, “Comfort my people,” says the Lord, “tell them that I will end this exile, and I will solve their deeper problem as well, their sin. From my hand came their punishment, but from my hand will also come the payment and pardon for their sin.”
- “From my hand...” God will provide a way, just as he always has.
- In response to this call to give comfort, three voices cry out (3, 6, & 9):
 - In 3-5, a voice cries out that a way will be prepared and leveled for God in the wilderness. The valleys will be lifted, the mountains lowered, and the uneven ground smoothed. In other words, the way will be straight, smooth, and obvious: God will act and reveal his glory to the world.

- This actually matches a Babylonian hymn for festive, parade routes for their gods.
 - In 6-8, the next voice cries “the word of our God will stand forever” (8). All flesh is as grass and flowers that wither and fade at the breath of the Lord, but his word stands forever. No one, no man, no king, no army, no empire, nothing can stop God’s word, his promises, from coming true.
 - In 9-11, which is probably better to read as “herald of good news to Zion” and “herald of good news to Jerusalem,” the third voice cries, “Behold your God!” He comes with might and a strong arm with his reward and recompense, which sounds scary, but he will use this might and strength to tenderly gather his flock, gather his lambs, and gently carry and lead those who need help.
 - The language of this third voice is meant to picture a conquering, victorious God arriving on the road paved for him (3-5) whose “winnings” are the flock that he has tenderly gathered to himself. In other words, a new exodus.
- The promises of these 3 voices are then doubly guaranteed before being echoed by 3 pictures.
 - First, in 40:12-31, the promises of God are guaranteed because he is the Creator.
 - In a section that sounds a bit like God’s answer to Job, the hearer is asked questions like “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?” (12) and “Who has (directed) the spirit of the Lord, and whom did he consult?” (13-14)
 - God is declared to be all-powerful (12), all-wise (13-14), completely dominant over the nations (15-17), the incomparable and only God (18-20), and the King of Kings who sits above the earth (21-24). He created, knows, and manages all the stars in the sky (26)
 - So, why do you say, O Jacob, O Israel, O people of God, (read, O people of *this* God) that your way is hidden (that he does not see you in exile) and that your right is disregarded (that he will not bring and is not concerned about justice)? (27)
 - Have you not heard? He is the Everlasting God and Creator of all. He never grows weary and his understanding is far beyond our comprehension. He gives of his might to the faint and those who need help. Young men grow weary, but those who wait on (hope, patiently wait, trustfully rest in) the Lord are given his strength (28-31).
 - In other words, God sees and knows and will help. Don’t look to human help and strength that fails but to God. Trust in him. The language of v. 31 purposefully echoes exodus language from Ex. 19:4 to say again that God will provide a new exodus.
 - Second, in 41:1-7, the promises of God are guaranteed because he is the Ruler of the World.
 - In these 7 verses a quick court case is called to determine who is the ruler of the world.
 - God calls all nations to strengthen themselves (40:31) and gather to listen in silence. He asks them who is the one that has stirred up the “one from the east” (Assyria, Babylon, etc.), empowered him, and directed him? Who has performed this, and who has called all the generations from the beginning? The answer is the Lord, who is the first and last.
 - The coastlands (nations) see this and tremble. They band together, form idols to worship and “strengthen” themselves, even declaring of these idols “it is good” (creation), and strengthening them with nails, but the God who is first and last (Alpha & Omega) is greater than a god that must be held with nails to become “unchangeable.”
- Finally, in echo of the 3 voices of consolation 40:3-11, 3 pictures of consolation are given in 41:8-20. These pictures also echo and expand 40:31 (mount up with wings like eagles):
 - In 8-13, God will give victory to his servant, Israel. He has not cast his servant off, but will strengthen him (renew their strength) and uphold him with his right hand.

- In 14-16, the worm of Jacob will become a threshing sledge, removing all obstacles with the help of the Lord. (wings like eagles in 40:31, here worm becomes threshing sledge).
- In 17-20, the thirsty in the desert will be given water and shade (walk and not faint).
- All the promises, guarantees, and pictures we have seen so far seem to focus on Israel. What about the promises for the nations and how God will one day have a people for himself from all nations like we have read about many times so far in Isaiah? This is the question that transitions us into the next section.

41:21-42:17 - Hope for the World

- Remember those idols that the world made in their trembling in 40:5-7? They are called to court.
- The King of Jacob (Israel) calls all peoples to bring their idols (let them bring them) for a test: let them tell us the former things, or declare the things to come, tell us what is to come, do good or do harm. In other words, do something! But they are nothing, though. Their work is less than nothing. And those who choose them are an abomination, condemned (21-24).
- In 25-29, God then declares his ability to do what they cannot. He knows and declares the future. Among the gods, there is no knowledge, no counselor. They are a delusion, empty wind.
- Is there no hope then for the nations? No! The third “Behold!” (42:1, see 41:24, 29) gives the answer.
- God’s servant will bring justice to the nations. “The coastlands wait for his law” (42:4).
- The servant will be given as a covenant for the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, and free the prisoners from their dungeons and their darkness (6-7). The Lord will do this (8-9).
- In response to this, there is a call for a new song to be sung to the Lord from the ends of the earth, from Gentile lands (Kedar and Sela). Let them give glory to the Lord, for he fights for them! (12-13) For a long time he has been silent to them, but now he cries out and acts on their behalf in ways that, in 15-16, sound just like his promises to act for Israel in 40-41!
- The Lord is the Creator and Lord of all, and he will have a people for himself from all peoples!

42:18-44:23 - The Plans of God

- In a beautiful transition into the next section, God calls the deaf (plural) of the world to hear and the blind (plural) of the world to see, but they see a deaf and blind servant (national Israel)! (18-19) How will this deaf and blind servant become the servant that we just read about at the beginning of this chapter? This is the question that opens the section on the plans of God.

42:18-43:21 - Redemption from Bondage

- Problem (42:18-25): Israel was God’s servant, his messenger, his dedicated one, but they are deaf, blind, plundered, trapped, given over to judgment by the Lord (exile), and they didn’t even understand it or take it to heart.
- Solution (43:1-7): But, even to this Israel, God says, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you.” This fire will not totally consume. I am still your Lord and will bring you home (return from exile).
- Sure Promises (against idols) (43:8-13): To remind them to trust in him alone, he reconvenes the court of nations he had called before and calls Israel to be his witnesses but, notice, that he does all the talking. He reminds them that the gods cannot prophecy, but he can. His word will come true just as it always has. He will act so that they may know and believe and witness of him. He alone can deliver.
- Redemption (43:14-21): This act that he will do, this deliverance, is spelled out in 43:14-21. He will bring down Babylon (14-17) and bring a new exodus (18-21, esp. 19).

43:22-44:23 - Redemption from Sin

- Problem (43:22-24): “Yet” (22)... “Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob, but you have been weary of me, O Israel!” “Despite everything I have done and will do for you, despite how I have proven myself again and again, you are weary of me.”

- You haven't honored me with your sacrifices. They weren't meant to be a burden to you, but you have turned them into a burden to me (remember the fake and empty worship of chapter 1??). You have burdened me with your sin and wearied me with your iniquity (22-24).
- Solution (43:25-44:5): Yet, this same God that they have burdened and wearied will blot out their transgressions for his own sake (25).
 - In 26-28, he quickly brings them to court and declares them guilty of sin and worthy of judgment
 - But, amazingly, in 44:1-5, he tells them to "fear not," for he has "chosen" them and will one day pour his spirit on them to give them new life and make them holy to the Lord.
- Sure Promises (against idols) (44:6-20): God, then, as their Redeemer, promises that he will do this (6-8). He is the first and the last, and there is no other god who can thwart his plan. He challenges any other god to proclaim and lay out what is to come. Without even pausing (since he knows there is no answer), he says again, "fear not," there is no other god, he alone is the Rock who can be trusted (8).
 - 9-20 then give a lengthy explanation of the foolishness and emptiness of the idols. They are objects made by people who then ask these objects to save them. 20 summarizes it well by saying, "He feeds (strengthens) himself on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'"
 - The idols are mankind making a god for themselves then trying to use their own creation (so effectively their own power) to save themselves. The makers and worshippers of the idols do all the work (12-17) and ask their own work to save them, but it only enslaves them in a lie.
 - This is the exact opposite of the Lord, the True God, who does all the work for his people (his vineyard), is able to save by the redemption he will provide, and frees them from their bondage, both physical and spiritual (for they had also chosen to enslave themselves to lies).
- Redemption (44:21-23): In a beautiful transition into the second statement of redemption, this time spiritual, God says, "Remember these things (what he just said)...you are my servant, I formed you (not the other way around like the idols); you are my servant (slave, like those who have enslaved themselves to the idols, but the fate of and promise to the slaves of God is infinitely better to the fate of and promises to the slaves of idols); O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me. I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you."
 - 23 - This section then closes with a song of loud praise sung in the past tense to show the certainty of this redemption: "Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it; shout, O depths of the earth; break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and will be glorified in Israel."

Conclusion & Application

- Over the next 2 weeks, we will see these two acts of redemption, or deliverance, spelled out, first in deliverance from exile (44:24-48:22) and then in deliverance from sin (49:1-55:13).
- We will also see a transition in the identity of the "servant" that we have already read much about.
- As we end today, I see two comforts from what we just read:
- First, God sees and knows of both our physical and our spiritual struggles and longs to help us with both. A challenge I see, though, in this is that he declares that our spiritual needs are greatest, yet these are often the ones we pray for the least, especially when we are facing physical difficulties.
- Second, God knows our frame. He repeatedly called his failing people to be his witnesses. Effectively saying, "Watch me work for you because I know you don't have the strength to do this, and declare what you have seen me do to the world." This is still our call today, his people that so often fail him.

Isaiah 44:24-48:22

The First Act of Deliverance: Deliverance from Exile

Outline of 40-55

- 40:1-44:23 - The Promises & Plans of God: dealing with exile and sin
 44:24-48:22 - The First Act of Deliverance: deliverance from exile
 49:1-55:13 - The Second Act of Deliverance: deliverance from sin.

Introduction

Last week, we looked at Isaiah 40:1-44:23, which is the introduction to the second part of Isaiah, or “The Book of the Servant.” In this introduction, God promised comfort for his people and declared his plans to deliver them from both their physical bondage of exile in Babylon and also from their spiritual bondage to sin. This week, we are going to look at 44:24-48:22, which is the first part of this plan: deliverance from exile. What we will see in this deliverance is that it is a great deliverance, but it is a great deliverance that shows a need for an even greater deliverance.

Outline of 44:24-48:22

- 44:24-45:8 - God’s Plan...Cyrus??
 45:9-46:13 - God’s Plan Defended
 47:1-48:22 - God’s Plan Accomplished...?

Commentary

44:24-45:8 - God’s Plan...Cyrus??

- As we begin looking at the first part of God’s two-act plan of deliverance, we have to first acknowledge that we have the advantage of hindsight. We know that this happened, and we know that it ended up being a good thing for Israel, but this would not have been the perspective of the original audience.
- You can see this even here in the opening verses in how the plan is presented and how Cyrus is revealed, and we will see it again in the immediate defense of this proclamation in the next section.
- This opening section is enclosed in self-affirmations by the Lord to declare and affirm to the people that he is ultimately responsible for what Cyrus will do.
 - 44:24 - “Your Redeemer...who formed you...I am the Lord...who made all things
 - 44:25-26a - I am the one who makes fools of those who seek other Gods and who confirms the words of my messengers.... (then, skipping to the end of the section...)
 - 45:5-6 - “I am the Lord, and there is no other.”
 - 45:7-8 - “I create light and darkness, well-being and calamity (the rise and fall of nations that Isaiah talks so much about)...I am the Lord, who does all these things...I...have created it.”
- Notice also how the promise of Cyrus is nestled inside of promises that would have been what the people were expecting and wanting to hear:
 - 26b - I declare that Jerusalem and the cities of Judah will be rebuilt.
 - 27 - I make a way of deliverance and exodus (“dry up your rivers”).
 - 28a - ~The prophecy of Cyrus.~
 - 28b - I say Jerusalem will be rebuilt and the foundations of the temple will be laid.
 - 45:1-3a - ~What Cyrus will do~
 - 45:3b - I do this so that you (Cyrus) may know that I am God and I have declared it to be.

- 45:4a - I do this for the sake of my people.
- 45:5-6 - I do this so that all peoples may know that I am the Lord, and there is no other.
- All of these promises are exactly what the people would have expected to hear and would have wanted.
- But what about what is said about Cyrus?
 - God says of Cyrus, “He is my shepherd (44:28)...the Lord’s anointed, whose right hand I have grasped (45:1)...I will go before you and level the exalted places. I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron (45:2)...I...call you by your name (45:3,4).”
 - “Shepherd” and “anointed” are both kingly terms that specifically would have brought to mind the Davidic line. The rest of the phrases are the same exact phrases God had used in promises to his people of his work for them and his specific call to them.
 - The scandal of what is being said, then, is that Cyrus is going to do the work of the line of David. He is promised to be, in effect, a replacement for the line of David to bring them back to the land.
 - The deliverer in this exodus will not be a Moses, to whom God revealed his name (Ex. 3), but a Cyrus of whom we are twice told “you do not know me (God).” This is the Lord’s “anointed”!
 - The “hope” of the people was the next great conqueror and a pagan who doesn’t know God?
 - The people are being told that the exile will end through a pagan king and their home-going will be as a still-subject people with a city and temple rebuilt by his direction—and without any reference to a Davidic restoration. This is God’s plan??

45:9-46:13 - God’s Plan Defended

- The scandal of this—which we so easily miss because we see Cyrus as a good thing looking back historically and as a great, specific prophecy of God that was fulfilled (which it is)—is what leads into the defense of God’s plan that is laid out in 45:9-46:13.

45:9-13 - God’s Right to Use Cyrus

- The first part of the response to this question is seen in 45:9-13, in which God basically says that he has the right to do this since he is the Creator.
- All of the pictures in these verses—potter, father, mother, and former of Israel—have the idea of “Creator.”
- This is brought home in the rhetorical question of 11: “Will you command me concerning my children and the work of my hands?” (Potter/Parent)
- God, as the Creator, has every right to use Cyrus as his instrument to accomplish his plans.

45:14-25 - Israel is Still Central in God’s Plans for the World

- The 2nd part of the response is seen in 45:14-25, in which God explains that, though a Gentile king will function as the next deliverer, Israel is still central to his plan of salvation for the world.
- 14-17 tell of a future reversal when the nations will bow to Israel’s God, admitting that he is the only God, as surprising (hidden) as this is. Those who look to idols are put to shame, but those who look to the Lord will never be ashamed.
- 18-25 expand this out and invite the nations to come to God. 18-19 declare that God created with a purpose, revealed himself plainly, and his words will come true. 20-24 are a call to the nations to find their hope and salvation in God rather than the idols that cannot deliver. And 23-25 end this call by promising that, one day, all will bow to God. The Lord will vindicate Israel and their hope in him.

46:1-13 - God will Accomplish His Plan despite the Stubbornness of His People

- The 3rd and final part of the response is seen in 46:1-13. In these verses, God says that he will accomplish his plan and show that he is the only true God, despite the stubbornness of his people (8,12).
- The idols of the gods of Babylon are carried. They are burdens. They cannot save. Just as they must be carried, they will be carried into exile (1-2).

- The Lord, though, carries, or bears, his people. He will save. He can deliver from exile (3-4).
- In short, what this chapter is saying is, “Don’t look to the idols of Babylon to carry you out of exile. They can’t even carry themselves, but I have always carried you. I will deliver you. My purposes and plans will come true (10-13).”

47-48 - God’s Plan Accomplished...?

- The final part of our chapters for today, chapters 47-48, describes the accomplishment of these promised plans. First, 47 describes the fall of Babylon. Then, 48, describes the call of captive Israel to go home.
- This section, though, doesn’t end on the happy note that you might expect.

47 - The Fall of Babylon

- First, in chapter 47, the fall of Babylon and God’s judgment on it is poetically described in wording that serves as the basis for Revelation’s commentary on the fall of the final Babylon in Rev. 18.
- In 1-4, Babylon is called to sit in the dust and put on the clothing of a slave and an exile, for the Lord, the Redeemer of his people, will act in judgment on her.
- In 5-11, God says that he was angry with his people and let Babylon judge them, but Babylon has abused them and become prideful. Babylon has claimed, “I am, and there is no one besides me (8,10),” a claim to ultimate power and supremacy, but this is only true of God.
 - Babylon believes herself to be invincible through her power, wisdom, and sorcery (religion), but God will bring sudden destruction to her.
- In 12-13, God challenges Babylon to “stand fast” in her enchantments, sorceries, and counselors—to look to her gods and their priests and their “wisdom.” “Let them stand forth and save you” (13).
- What she will find, though, is laid out in 14-15. Her gods and her priests and diviners are like stubble that the fire consumes. They and the “wisdom” they provide give no comfort (“no fire to sit before”).
- In fact, “they” (the priests, sorcerers, enchanters, and astrologers) will “wander about, each in his own direction.” They will “wander,” or exit. They will flee and abandon Babylon, and no one will be left to save her.

48 - The Release of the Captives

- The final chapter and second part of the accomplishment of God’s plan is the release of his captive people and their call to go home, but this call comes near the end of a scathing rebuke of his people.
- In 1-2, God calls them Jacob, Israel, and Judah, pointing them back to God’s promises to their fathers, but says that they confess him “not in truth or right” (think chapter 1), and verse 2 is probably best read to mean that they comfort themselves in thinking that he is their God (“God of Israel”), but he is also “the Lord of hosts,” who is their Judge. He isn’t a little, local god they can appease, but the Lord of All.
- In 3-5, he explains that, because of their stubbornness, he has always revealed his plans (former things) so that, when they happen, they cannot claim that the idols did it.
- In 6-11, God transitions from the “former things” to “new things.”
- He transitions with a question in the beginning of 6. “You have heard (my former prophecies); now see all this (how they all came true), and will you not declare it?” In other words, “Learn that I am trustworthy and sovereign, because now I am about to show you something new (6b).
- He explains in 7-8 that he had not revealed these “new things” yet because it would just be another opportunity for the people to rebel. He reveals his plan in stages, then, to limit their rebellion and limit their tendency to live in their own knowledge and “wisdom.” Man, does God know his people well!
- Verses 9-11 answer the implied question of “why even reveal anything at all or spare your anger and accomplish your deliverance if they are so stubborn and rebellious at heart?”

- The answer is that he does it for his own sake and for his name. He made promises, and he will accomplish them, despite the rebellion of his people. He will not abandon or destroy his people like the other gods who cannot deliver because he is not just another god. He is the Lord of All, and what he says will happen will happen.
- He then begins another series of calls to listen in 12-22.
- In 12-13, he repeats again that he is the Creator, the first and the last.
- Then, in 14-16, we have 2 calls to listen (14 & 16) which, I believe, lay out the former and new things, just like 3-8 had earlier in the chapter. 14-15 is about Cyrus (“former things,” or deliverance part 1), and 16 is about one whom the Lord sends along with his Spirit (“new things,” or deliverance part 2).
 - Because the wording about this one who is sent is so similar to what we see in 61:1 about the Servant, which Jesus quotes of himself. I think it is best to read this as a teaser, if you will, about the “new things” that the Servant will accomplish, which are laid out in the next section (49-55).
- This teaser of a greater work to come is seen again in 17-22.
- In 17-19, the Lord laments over the peace that might have been if only his people had listened to him.
- Then, in what feels like an interruption between 17-19 and 22 and their theme of “peace,” God calls the people to leave Babylon. He has “redeemed” them, and he will lead them as if on a new exodus (20-21).
- 22 ends the chapter and this section, though, with “There is no peace for the wicked.” What??
 - First, yes, this (along with 57:21) is where the saying “no rest for the wicked” comes from.
- If you read 17-19 then skip to 22, it flows well to say that the people have neglected and been unable to find peace. The return from exile feels like an interruption in this statement of the condition of the people. One commentator says it well: “A change of scene does not produce a change of heart.” (TOTC)
- The people may be home, but they are not at peace with God. A greater deliverance than this is needed.

Conclusion & Application

- This return from exile was just a picture of a greater liberation, a greater redemption, to come.
- The return was, honestly, a letdown. Caleb did a whole series on this through Ezra, Esther, & Nehemiah, so I won’t rehash all of his series, but only a small portion of the people returned, they had to convince some from the tribe of Levi to come back so that they would have priests, the walls of the city enclosed a much smaller area, the rebuilt temple was not nearly as majestic as Solomon’s, and God’s glory did not even come down to the rebuilt temple.
- In fact, after this longed-for return, the last historical event we have in the Old Testament is Nehemiah having to deal with multiple sin issues in the life of the people...who had literally just promised to not commit those sins (Neh. 13).
- The return from exile was *an* answer that the people needed, but it wasn’t *the* answer they needed.
- The deliverance from exile was accomplished by an unexpected person in an unexpected way, and we will see that this is going to be true—but in a much greater sense—of the Person who will accomplish the deliverance from their greater captivity: their sin.
- They wanted deliverance on their terms, in their way, and to be able to keep living how they wanted.
- But God had a much greater plan: a deliverance that he will provide in a new way that will change their heart and pour down his Spirit on them (48:16, 32:15, 44:3).
- It is to this plan of a greater deliverance that we will look at next week.

Isaiah 49-55

The Second Act of Deliverance: Deliverance from Sin

Introduction

Last week, we looked at Isaiah 44:24-44:22, which covered the first act of deliverance: deliverance from exile. We saw, however, that this deliverance, as great as it was, ended in disappointment. The people (or at least some of them) were back in their land, but their hearts were unchanged. They continued to commit the very types of sins that led to their exile in the first place, and we don't read of God's glory ever coming down to the temple that they rebuilt. Isaiah, through God's vision given to him, saw all this and prophesied a need for a greater deliverance—a deliverance from their greater problem and greater captivity: their sin. It is to this greater act of deliverance that we will look this week in chapters 49-55.

Outline of 49-55

- 49:1-13 - The Task of the Servant
- 49:14-50:11 - The servant & the Servant
- 51:1-52:12 - Salvation Promised
- 52:13-53:12 - Salvation Accomplished
- 54-55 - Call to Respond

Commentary

Introduction to “Servant” Theme & the “Servant Songs”

- As we work through these chapters, we are going to see the development of the Person and work of “the Servant,” which is the major theme of this 2nd portion, or “book” of Isaiah, “The Book of the Servant.”
- There are 4 passages known as “Servant Songs.” We saw the first one back in 42:1-9. The other three are in today's chapters (49:1-13; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12).
- There is debate about who exactly each of the four songs is primarily speaking about, but the structure of the whole “Book of the Servant” helps us, I think, to have a pretty good idea.
- Back in 41:21-29, God called all the nations to bring their idols to court so that they could prove themselves by declaring their previously fulfilled prophecies, declaring the future, or (more desperately) doing something, anything at all!
- But, they were unable. Only God is able to know and declare the future (41:25). Of the idols, God says “Behold, you are nothing” (41:24) and “Behold, they are all a delusion” (41:29).
- Is there no hope, then, for the nations that look to these idols? No! The very next verse (42:1) begins the first servant song, continuing the drumbeat of “Behold.” This Servant Song says, “Behold, my servant...he will bring justice to the nations (1)...the coastlands wait for his law (4)...I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations (6).”
- But, when in verse 18 the deaf and blind nations are called to hear, look, and see, the “servant” they see—the nation of Israel—is just as blind and deaf as they are! The nation is in exile and hasn't even learned the point, or “take[n] it to heart” (25).
- There is a need for a servant who is dedicated to God, faithful, and a light to the nations. (I would argue that this is actually one of the main reasons why Israel was positioned geographically where they were, positioned on the highway between the major powers of the world. The light at the crossroads.)
- The problem is that the nation, the servant (41:8-9), is in just as much need for the work of this servant as the nations are! And this unfortunate truth is reinforced throughout chapters 43-48, where we see that

God plans to bring the people back from exile, but we also see declared in many ways that they need an even greater work of deliverance: deliverance from their captivity to their sin.

- The closing verses of chapter 48 call for rejoicing at the return from exile but end with the somber note that there is still wickedness to be dealt with in the people. They are home, but with unchanged hearts.
- Just as the nations had been called to court before the first servant song (41:21), so also Israel is called to assemble and listen (48:14) to God's judgments and declarations. As God had declared that he is God and the idols are nothing to the nations in 41, so he declares these same things to his people in 48.

49:1-13 - The Task of the Servant

- This context brings us to what is essentially a restart with the second "Servant Song" (49:1-13). The coastlands and "peoples from afar," the audience of the first "Servant Song" (41:5; 42:1, 4), are called again to listen.
- Then, this "Servant Song" speaks of one "called from the womb," almost a verbatim description about national Israel that we saw in 44:2, and 49:3 explicitly says, "You are my servant, Israel."
- But then verse 5 again speaks of one whom God "formed from the womb to be his servant," and this servant will bring back Jacob (Israel), the servant (41:8-9), to him.
- And verse 6 goes on to say that this servant will not only raise up and bring back Jacob (Israel), for that "is too light a thing"! He will also be a "light for the nations"...through whom "salvation may reach to the end of the earth." He will be "a covenant to the people" (8).
- "Light" and "covenant" (also in 42:6) are but two of the many connections between the first two "Servant Songs" that show that this is a restart that has built on the material between the two.
- The servant that the nations were called to look to is now shown to be the one who must first gather back the nation of Israel (the "servant") itself first, though the nation will despise and abhor him (7)!
- This Servant must save the "servant" and the world, though, it seems, he will do this at a cost to himself.
- 13- Just as the first Servant Song was followed by a call for the nations to sing to the Lord (42:10-12), so also the second Servant Song is followed by a call for the heavens and earth to sing (49:13). The very earth, the mountains, cry out this time, for the servant has brought the promised comfort to the people.
- The "comfort" promised at the very beginning of the Book of the Servant (40:1) will become a reality through the work of this Servant.

49:14-50:11 - The servant & the Servant

- But, unfortunately, singing and praise is not the immediate response that we read in the next verse (14).
- In 49:14-50:11 we read yet another contrast between the servant (nation) and the Servant (individual).

-49:14-50:3 - The Nation (servant): Disbelief & Lack of Response

- First, in 49:14-50:3, we read of disbelief and a lack of response from national Israel, or "Zion."
- Zion doubts and disbelieves in 49:14.
- But God promises he will never forget them (14-16). He will reverse their fortunes and cause them to increase (17-20). He will cause the nations of the world to honor them (21-23). He will deliver them from all oppression (24-26). He will ransom them (50:1-3).
- In the midst of this final promise of ransom, though, where God promises them that he has the power to ransom and deliver them, he declares that when he called out there was no answer, no faith, no belief, no response (50:2).

-50:4-11 - The Individual (Servant): Belief & Response

- Then, in verse 4, a lone voice answers as the third Servant Song begins (50:4-9).
- The servant nation gives no response but an individual Servant answers.

- In 4-9 he declares that God has taught him what to say, opened his ears, opened his eyes, helped him, and vindicated him. He will not rebel or turn backward but will take the strikes, the pain, the disgrace, and the mockery of those who contend against him and declare him guilty and worthy of such abuse.
- He will stand firm in faith through all this, knowing that God will be with him and vindicate him.
- After this third Servant Song we read not a call to sing but a question and call to respond in 10-11.
- Essentially what these verses say is: If you fear God, obey the voice of his servant. If you are facing darkness in your life, trust in the Lord and listen to what his servant tells you about God. That is the light that you need (10). The faithful remnant, then, will be those who listen to the Servant.
- If you try to make or provide your own light, it will end in your destruction (11). Only the Servant provides light (remember how the first two Servant Songs called him the “light for the nation?”).

51:1-52:12 - Salvation Promised

- This call for those who fear the Lord to listen to his Servant leads into a more extended call in 51:1-52:12 for those who seek God to listen to and respond to the promises and plans of God, which are laid out in the next section, which is the final Servant Song, 52:13-53:12.
- 51 opens with 3 calls to listen to God’s promises (1, 4, & 7). In the first call (1-3), God tells his people to look to Abraham & Sarah and God’s faithfulness to them. God will also be faithful to Zion and comfort her. He will make her like Eden.
- Just as the promise to Abraham was that his offspring through Sarah would bless the world and just as the call to Adam & Eve in Eden was to fill, subdue, and have dominion of the earth, so the second call declares that God’s law, justice, righteousness, and salvation will spread to the whole earth.
- The third call promises that no opposition of man will succeed. God’s purposes will last forever.
- In 9-11, Isaiah cuts in with an appeal for the Lord to act and provide this new exodus soon.
- In 12-16, God answers the plea of 9 to “awake, awake” with “I, I am he who comforts you.”
 - The call of 40:1 that began all this, “Comfort, comfort my people” is answered by God himself.
- There is no need to be afraid that the oppression or opposition of man will stop God’s plan, for God is the Creator (13) and Lord of Hosts (15). He will not abandon his people (16).
- 51:17-52:12 then close this section with 3 calls to respond:
 - 51:17-23 - Wake up because God’s wrath has been removed.
 - 52:1-10 - Wake up and walk in holiness because God has comforted, redeemed, and saved his people.
 - 52:11-12 - Depart and walk as pure pilgrims, for a new and greater exodus has come. You will not go in haste like the first exodus, but in purity and protection, for the Lord is with you.
- But how is all of this possible??

52:13-53:12 - Salvation Accomplished

- 53:13 - “Behold, my Servant.” The Servant will accomplish all this.
- 52:13-15 - He will act wisely (or will prosper). He will be high and lifted up and exalted. Many will be astonished at (you/him) and his suffering. Through this suffering, he will sprinkle (startle) many nations. Even kings will shut their mouths (be dumbfounded/amazed) because of what they learn through him.
- 53:1 continues this theme of astonishment by basically asking, “Who could have believed that this was the arm (power/plan) of God?”
- But what is this astonishing power and plan of God of exultation through a suffering Servant?
- This question is answered in 53:2-12.
- 2a - He grew up like a young plant, like a root from dry ground...Hey. We’ve seen that imagery before!

- 2b-3 - But there was nothing special or appealing about his appearance or social status to make people follow him. In fact, he was despised and rejected, all too familiar with pain and grief.
- 4 - He bore our griefs and sorrows, our sicknesses and pain, yet we esteemed him stricken by God.
 - He healed us, but we thought he deserved harm from God.
- 5 - But the punishment he took for us was for an even greater healing: He was pierced for our transgression and crushed for our iniquities. He took the punishment so that we can have peace with God. By his wounds, we are healed.
- 6 - Every single one of us has gone astray and turned from God to our own way, but the Lord laid on him our iniquity, our rebellion.
- 7 - Through all this pain and suffering, he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, he accepted that this was the task he was sent to accomplish.
- 8 - By oppression and judgment, better read and oppressive or unjust judgment, he was led away to a death sentence. He was “cut off from the land of the living” (worded this way to evoke exile imagery). Taken away, exiled, killed for the transgression of the people.
- 9 - They prepared his grave, though he had done nothing wrong.
- 10 - Yet, this was the will of God, the grief and death of the Servant. His selfless, innocent, unblemished offering was a guilt offering for us. When he has accomplished this offering, he will come back to life (prolong his days), for the will of God will prosper in his hands.
- 11 - After his suffering, he will see (light/life) and be satisfied. He will have experienced and know what is required to save sinners. Through his suffering, he will make many be counted as righteous and bear their sins (the “bearing” purposefully has Day of Atonement imagery).
- 12 - Because of what the Servant has done (his willing and unjust death to bear our sins), the Lord will give him his reward: “a portion with the many,” likely a way of referring to the Servant’s part in the restored relationship between God and his people, especially since the last line points to his continued role to make intercession for the people based on his accomplished work.

54:1-55:13 - Call to Respond

- Fittingly so, chapters 54-55 form the largest call to response of any of the Servant Songs.
- This call to respond is given first to Israel in 54 then to all in 55. For the sake of time, I will not be working through these chapters, but I would highly encourage you to read them.

Conclusion and Application

After service today, we are going to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, which we do to remember Jesus’ sacrifice and the first Lord’s Supper that he had with his disciples at the Passover Meal.

Matthew 26:26-29 says, “as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.’”

Jesus, the Servant, the light to the nations, the new covenant, the Passover Lamb, our guilt offering, our Redeemer, willingly drank the cup of God’s wrath for us. The “servant” nation of Israel failed and needed the work of the Servant as much as the world around her. Our need is the same, and our call is the same: trust in the Lord and in his Servant. Jesus is at the right hand of the Father making intercession for those who put their faith in him. As Is. 50:11 reminds us, there is no other light. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

Read 55:1-3a

Isaiah 56-66

Living in the In-Between

Outline of Isaiah (Review)

- 1-5 - The Situation (The Preface):** the failure of Judah and the forfeiture of the promises?
6 - Isaiah's Atonement & Commission: the individual who stands for the community
7-39 - The Promise (The King): the failure of the Davidic king and the promise of the true David
40-55 - The Answer (The Servant): the sin of the people born by the sin-bearing Servant
56-66 - The End (The Conqueror): the call to live in obedience & righteousness, waiting for the final victory

Introduction

Today, we enter the final portion of Isaiah, "The Book of the Conqueror." I have honestly been trying to find a different way to do this, but I haven't found a better, more clear and helpful way; so, what we are going to do today is look at the entire last section in one fell swoop. All of the last 11 chapters are working together to form one message, so I couldn't really find a satisfying way to break them up. They also form a chiasm, with the main theme being in the middle of the section, which makes dividing it even more difficult. Lastly, we need to review the chapters I skipped last week, 54-55, to understand the context leading into this section. So, because of all this, I apologize if I don't look up much from my manuscript, because if I go off-script too much, we will be here all day. So...buckle up, because we are about to cover a lot of ground.

(And if you are curious about what this means for the schedule of this sermon series, next week I plan to do a summary of Isaiah and give some examples of the NT use of Isaiah. The Q&A will still be the week before Easter.)

Isaiah 54-55 - Call to Respond to the Work of the Servant

54-55 - Call To Respond to the Work of the Servant

- In light of the work of the Servant (49-55) to bear the sin of the people in their place and provide a way of forgiveness, salvation, peace, and being counted as righteous, the call to response in 54-55 opens with a call to "Sing, O barren one" (54:1).
- Remember that chapters 40-55 are written as if to the people in exile in Babylon. The "barren one" is Jerusalem. Jerusalem is currently barren, abandoned, empty of its inhabitants, but, because of the work of the Servant, she will bear children that she wasn't even expecting and have to make more room (1-3).
 - Back in chapter 49, after the 2nd Servant Song, Zion, or Jerusalem, had responded in disbelief, but God had promised that, because of the work of his Servant, they would look around and ask themselves where all the children that they had not born had come from (49:19-23).
 - This is a repetition of and a song of praise for the fulfillment of that promise.
- God, her Husband, will gather her back to himself. He was angry for a time and cast her off (exile) due to her shameful, adulterous youth (idolatry/rebellion), but, due to his everlasting love, he will redeem her and bring her back (5-8). As the waters of Noah will not return, so his wrath will not return (9-10).
- The afflicted and storm-tossed Jerusalem, waiting for comfort, will be comforted because of the work of the Servant (a work of redemption/return even greater than the return from exile). She will be laid and built with precious stones. In other words, she will not only be restored but also glorified (11-12).
- Just as the Servant was taught directly from God (50:4-5), so also will she and her children (13). They will be established in righteousness, never to be overcome or to fall under the judgment of her enemies, for their righteousness, her vindication is from the Lord (14-17).

- “This is the heritage of the ‘servants’ of the Lord” (17).
 - Wait...taught by God, helped, vindicated, and glorified by God...these are all the same things that were said about the Servant, and now they are said about those who respond to his work.
 - **We are seeing the role of “servant” morph yet again, expanding out those who respond.**
- So, because of all this, “Come, everyone who thirsts” (55:1). This promise of water, this teaching of the people by God and making them precious and blessed that we see at the end of 54 and beginning of 55 is purposefully similar to 43:25-44:5, which was God’s promise of a solution to the problem of their sin, his promise to blot out their transgressions and open a way for them to be taught directly by him.
- This language is repeated here because this is accomplished by the work of the Servant. And tying the two passages together and seeing that the water imagery talks of the Spirit in 44 shows us that the work of the Servant opens the floodgates, if you will, for the pouring of the Spirit to make all this possible.
- It is because of this Servant that an “everlasting covenant” (3) will be made with the people. He will fulfill the promises to David. Like David (but even greater), he will be a witness to the peoples and a leader and commander for the people. Verse 5 switches into a masculine singular (FS for Zion in 54 then MP for the peoples in 55) because God is talking to the Servant, who is the new and greater David.
- Then the text switches right back to the 2MP in 6 as a call to respond goes out to all people for the rest of the chapter. All are called to seek the Lord. The wicked and unrighteous are called to abandon their own ways and thoughts and seek the Lord, for his ways and thoughts are higher (greater and better) than theirs (which has been the whole point of Isaiah) (6-10).
- His Word (his promises and plans, ways and thoughts) will not return empty. It will be accomplished (10-11). In Isaiah, we have seen so many times that the ways of those who reject God will end in destruction: the opposite of what they planned, but God’s ways will end in success and life. Those who put their trust in him will go out in joy and peace and enter into a renewed creation, with the effects of the curse reversed. This renewal will be an everlasting name for the Lord and sign of his glory (12-13).

Transition to 56-66

What a grand vision and call! This promise of joy and peace and of future renewal and restoration runs throughout 40–55, “The Book of the Servant,” and is made possible by the work of the Servant. But, as we continue into chapters 56-66, “The Book of the Conqueror,” Isaiah switches his intended audience. Now, it is no longer the exiles in Babylon, but those who have returned, who have heard these grand promises and wonder how this all fits into where they find themselves right now. The returned exiles, he knew, would misunderstand and struggle to grasp the gradual unfolding of God’s plan. These final chapters focus on their disillusionment, discouragement, confusion, and frustration, over having to wait for the total fulfillment of these things.

God, through Isaiah, now advises Israel on how to behave while they wait. After painting a glorious picture of what Yahweh’s salvation will look like in Isa 40–55, he now addresses the more practical reality of living for him in the present. This section is an acknowledgement of and encouragement through the present reality. The exiles who returned from Babylon did not experience the fullness of the blessings promised in chapters 40–55. Therefore, chs. 56–66 address their current experience within God’s larger plan of salvation and the glorious future reign of the Messiah and the restoration of all things.

Since Isaiah has given so many prophecies in a way that mixes immediate and future elements of God’s plan, it makes sense that the people would be disillusioned and confused, wondering where these fulfillments are. We can look through Isaiah today and look back on how many of the prophecies were gradually fulfilled, in whole or part, through the centuries and how so much was fulfilled in the work of Jesus, the Messiah, and the establishment of the church, which includes people from all nations, but this is a blessing of hindsight that the

original audience simply would not have had. And we also, by the way, have not yet seen the fulfillment of many things we see in Isaiah, so we are also in a time of in-between, if you will, or a time of already/not yet, in which many things have been fulfilled in part but not in whole. So, this last section still applies to us today.

Isaiah 56-66 - Living in the In-Between

56:1-8 - Challenge & Call

- The opening 8 verses of chapter 56, in fact, read like the opening and closing of the book of Revelation: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast.”
 - Just as in Revelation, the reader is encouraged to “keep the faith,” for the promises are coming.
- As I have studied this section, I think it would maybe be helpful to change how I have this last section titled in my outline and change it from “The End” to “What Now?”...What now? How are we to live now in light of these promises and as we wait for them? We have seen in part, but when will we see in full, and what are we to do until then?
 - These questions, by the way, are a helpful way to approach the book of Revelation as well.
- To the exiles who have returned back to their homeland, the Promised Land, but who have yet to see the fullness of the promises, Isaiah turns his prophetic voice and gives them instructions and encouragement. And I think his voice still offers the same for us today.
- The opening words, “Keep justice and do righteousness,” are a call to act with integrity and fairness towards others (justice) and correctly observe the laws of God and seek to be like him (righteousness) – in other words, love God and love others.
- These two terms, justice and righteousness, have been paired many times throughout the book of Isaiah as a summary for God, for what his people ought to be characterized by, and for what his redemption will be characterized by. So, in other words, what is being said is, “Live like you ought to. Live out my heart while you wait. Soon, my salvation will come, and my righteousness will be revealed.” Until then, you are to be—you get to be—the imagers of my righteousness to the world.
- So, hold fast, keep my Sabbath, and keep your hand from doing evil. (2)
- The Sabbath is put in focus here because, as 58:13 later explains, it represents a commitment to prioritize living the way that God has directed, to prioritize, in other words, him, to put God first. Trust in him. Rest in Him. Believe his promises. Do this, and you will be blessed.
- And this blessing is open to all, for, as 3-8 explain, let not the foreigner say, “I have no place here,” and let not the eunuch say, “I have no future here.” Those who keep the Sabbath (prioritize God and choose his way), those who hold to the covenant, those who choose God, to minister to him, to love him, and be his **servants (yes, this is another morph, expanding out again)**, will be gathered and welcomed onto his holy mountain and into his house, for his “house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.” (7)
- For, “The Lord God who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, ‘I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.’”
- This challenge and call in 56:1-8, to live in justice and righteousness while waiting for the fulfillment of the promises and while welcoming in anyone who “joins himself to the Lord” (3, 6), serves as a good summary of chapters 56-66, and it is expanded out through the chapters in a way that beautifully weaves together all the themes and imagery of the entire book of Isaiah.

Summary of 56-66

What I am going to do with our remaining time today, is give an outline and summary of how these last chapters expand out this call. The outline is purposefully simple to bring out the main points and flow of the text, and you will notice that it is a chiasm, with the main point at the middle, but this does not mean that each side is exactly identical. They are similar but emphasize the themes in slightly different ways, and there is a continual build throughout the chapters.

Outline of 56-66 - What Now?

- A - 56:1-8 - The Servants - Called to Righteousness
 - B - 56:9-59:15a - The Inability of the People
 - C - 59:15b-21 - The Divine Warrior Goes to Battle
 - D - 60 - Future Glory
 - E - 61:1-3 - The Servant
 - D' - 61:4-62:12 - Future Glory
 - C' - 63:1-6 - The Divine Warrior Wins the Battle
 - B' - 63:7-66:17 - The Ability of the Lord
- A' - 66:18-24 - The Servants - Clothed in Righteousness

Summary

- A-C of this outline is actually a pattern that is repeated twice.
 - The beginnings of 56 (1-8) and 58 (1-14) both speak of how the house and family of God is made of those who seek him and live in righteousness and justice, not simply those who are born to the right nation or family. (Trust God and live for him—the same call as 1-39.)
 - These are both followed by a statement of the inability of the people to live this way in their own strength (56:9-57:13; 59:1-15a) (—the same failure of 1-39).
 - Finally, each series ends with a promise that God will come and fight for them and enable this righteousness that he commands (57:14-21; 59:15b-21) (the work of the Servant in 40-55).
- D-E of this outline, like the visions of chapter 2 and 4 and the many Messiah and Servant passages, speak of a restored, purified Jerusalem, with God's salvation and glory on full display, the nations coming to Jerusalem to learn about the Lord.
 - 61:1-3 is centered in this passage as the mountain peak, if you will, of 56-66. In these three short verses, all the promises of the the Servant, the Messiah, the King of the line of David, the Redeemer, the Conqueror, and the Comforter are all placed on the shoulders of the one anointed by the Lord and whom the Spirit of the Lord rests upon. All of this is possible because of him.
 - To reinforce this, chapters 60-62 (D-E) are immediately surrounded by Divine Warrior Passages (C & C'). God will himself go to war and win the battle in the Person of the Servant.
- C'-A' - Just as A-C had a pattern within the pattern, so also C'-A' has a pattern within the pattern.
 - This pattern focuses on the Lord's ability and his way, rather than ours.
 - He is the Divine Warrior who has and will win through the work of his Servant (C'). He is able.
 - But his people ask, "But where are you? Why haven't you saved us from our bondage to our sin? Are you able?" (63:7-64:12)
 - God answers, "I am here (65:1). I am able. But you did not seek me as I have asked, but in your own way which will lead to your own destruction." (65:1-16) (see Is. 50:10-11).
 - This ability-question of ability-ability is then followed by a pattern of hope-judgment-hope-judgment-hope in 65:17-66:24 which is a purposeful reversal of the pattern

of judgment-hope-judgment-hope-judgment seen in chapters 1-5. God is able to create (or re-create), the heavens and the earth, Jerusalem and his people, which will include all peoples.

- Because of the work of the Servant, hope has won out against judgment. There is still judgment for those who do not submit to the work of the Servant, but there is hope available to anyone, of any nation, who bows before Him.
 - Through him, anyone can now become a priest and Levite, made holy by him (66:21).
- So, what now?
- Look to the Servant. Look to Jesus. He is your only hope and your only strength. Live in righteousness and justice through the help that he offers by the sending of his Spirit. The Lord is making a new creation, and it starts now in the new creation he makes in you as you submit to Jesus.
- In Luke 4, Jesus read some of Isaiah 61:1-3 and said, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled.” The Servant had arrived. We have yet to see the complete fulfillment of everything in Isaiah, but God’s plan was in motion, taking the next leap forward. He accomplished the work of Isaiah 53 and has given us a foretaste of the promises yet to be fulfilled.
- He has sent his Spirit, as promised, to those who believe, and Paul, in 2 Cor. 5:17, rightly saw that the salvation and indwelling by the Spirit that Jesus made possible was the start of the new creation. We are new creations in Christ. “Old things have passed away. All things have become new.”
- God calls you not to simply wait for the new creation still to come, but to take part in it today, through the work of his Servant.

Isaiah 1-66

Review & NT Use

Introduction

We made it. Last week, we finished the book of Isaiah, all 66 chapters of it. It took 15 weeks, but I'm sure it felt like a whirlwind at times with how many chapters we did each week. So, this week, we are going to do a review and overview of the book to remind ourselves of the flow and structure of everything we talked about, and I am also going to give a sampling of how the NT uses the book of Isaiah.

Then, next week, we are going to have our final sermon on Isaiah, which will be the Q&A, and I still can take more questions. So, if there is anything you would like to hear discussed from the book of Isaiah, please let me know soon so I can try to fit it in next week.

Outlines

The first thing I would like to do today is something that I have been asked about multiple times: outlines. With the size of the book, this is a good place to start, and I will summarize the book as we work through the outlines. I was thankful, by the way, for the request for outlines, because it gave me a chance to re-work through mine and polish them up.

The Book of Isaiah

1-5 - The Situation (The Preface): the failure of Judah and the forfeiture of the promises?

6 - The Atonement & Commission of Isaiah

7-39 - The Problem & The Promise (The Book of the King): the failure of the Davidic kings and the promise of the true David

40-55 - The Answer (The Book of the Servant): the sin of the people born by the sin-bearing Servant

56-66 - What Now? (The Book of the Conqueror): the call to live in obedience & righteousness while waiting for the final victory

Isaiah 1-5 - The Preface

1:1-31 - Judgment & Darkness, but with hope (1:9, 18-19, 26-27)

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? (v. 13 - exile)

- This introduction is a backdrop of darkness, or, like the illustration I gave at the time, a dramatic flash-forward, opening scene of a movie that ends on a cliffhanger before the title appears and the movie begins. The people have abandoned and rejected God. Their religion has become fake and appalling to God. He has tenderly cared for them, but they have rejected him, so he will expel them from the land.
- There are brief glimpses of hope scattered throughout, but this hope, this future glory, will only come after judgment comes first.

Isaiah 6 - Isaiah's Atonement & Commission

Chapter 5 ends in darkness, and it is in darkness that chapter 6 begins: "In the year that King Uzziah died." After a long and prosperous reign of over 50 years in which he was characterized mostly by doing what was right, King Uzziah died. Near the end of Uzziah's life, he had let his accomplishments and fame cause him

to become arrogant, and he tried to burn incense in the temple, though he was not a priest. He was punished with a skin disease and remained isolated for his last few years, with his son Jotham co-ruling with him. By the time of Uzziah's death, Judah was declining politically and spiritually, and the Assyrian empire was on the rise.

So, in this time of darkness, Isaiah receives a vision of "the Lord, sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up." Despite the darkness of this hour, the Lord is still sitting on his throne, high and lifted up over all.

Isaiah, seeing the Lord, seeing the seraphim, hearing their cry of "Holy, holy, holy," feeling the ground shake, and seeing the temple fill with the smoke of the glory of God's presence, cries out, "Woe is me!"

He realizes that he is not worthy, and he cannot make himself worthy to see what he is seeing or to be where he is. He is unclean and cannot make himself clean. But then a seraphim takes a burning coal from the altar, touches it to his mouth, and says, "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

The Lord made a way. He did what Isaiah could not do. He bridged the gap and provided a way of cleansing, atonement, forgiveness. Isaiah realized he was unclean and that he could not clean himself to be worthy to stand in God's presence, but God made a way. These verses give, on the individual scale, what needed to happen for all the people.

Isaiah is sent to speak for the Lord to the people but is told that they will not listen and that their fate is sealed. They will be exiled ("removed far away," 12); they will be like a tree felled and burned, but the stump, "the holy seed," will remain. There is still hope. God is not done with his people. Judgment will not be the final word. Hope will come from this holy seed. But when and how? These are the questions that lead into the rest of the book.

Isaiah 7-39 - The Book of the King

7:1-9:7 - The Promise of a Greater King

- Isaiah is sent to Uzziah's grandson, King Ahaz, near the beginning of his reign to challenge him to trust God rather than Assyria to help with the threat of the alliance of the northern tribes of Israel & Syria.
- Ahaz, however, refuses to trust God. Through prophetic names of three different sons, the certainty of God's Word and his trustworthiness is promised.
- One of the names of these promised sons, "Immanuel," morphs throughout this section into a future promise of God's deliverance of his people, and the section ends with the promise of a future "son of David" who will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."
- He will rule forever in righteousness and justice and bring peace, and he will be a light to the nations.

9:8-12:6 - The Promise of a Greater Exodus

- The next section covers similar material but from a more theological perspective. We read again here that God will judge the northern tribes and also Judah (at least to the extent that he allows), but we also read the why and how of his judgment on Assyria as well, even though he allows them to judge Israel.
- We also see the Messiah imagery that was developed and tied into the Immanuel imagery in the previous section continue to develop. The Messiah will be "a shoot from the stump of Jesse." Remember the "stump" back in chapter 6? From that stump, a "shoot" will come who will be filled with the Spirit and the fear of the Lord and do and be all that the kings of Israel and Judah had failed to do and be.
- He will bring a greater exodus than Moses, an exodus from all lands and of all peoples.

13-35 - Oracles & Woes to Show that God Is Trustworthy & Lord of All

13-27 - 3 Series of Oracles - The Lord of History

28-35 - 6 Woes - The Sovereign Word of God

- Isaiah's decades of ministry in Judah to Ahaz and his son, Hezekiah, are then beautifully arranged into a three series of oracles followed by 6 woes that repeatedly prove the trustworthiness of God and his Lordship over all and continually pose the question to the kings and the people, "Who will you trust?"

36-39 - The Need for a Greater King & Deliverer Confirmed

- This question is also what leads into the longest narrative section in Isaiah, 36-39. In 36-37 chapters, we see Hezekiah trust in God (eventually) to deliver Jerusalem from Assyria, but then Isaiah goes back in time in 38-39 to show Hezekiah's failure to trust in God as he chooses an alliance with Babylon.
- Hezekiah, who is largely characterized by doing what is right and who leads a great time of spiritual reformation in Judah, fails.
- Isaiah ends this section on this depressing note because Hezekiah, as good as he was, is not the King that the people need. And, as great and needed as it was, the deliverance of Jerusalem from Assyria was not the great act of deliverance that the people needed.
- Their hearts are still far from God, and they will go into exile, to Babylon.

Isaiah 40-55 - The Book of the Servant

40:1-44:23 - The Promises & Plans of God: dealing with exile and sin

44:24-48:22 - The First Act of Deliverance: deliverance from exile

49:1-55:13 - The Second Act of Deliverance: deliverance from sin.

- It is to these future people in exile that Isaiah next speaks in 40-55. To them, he gives the encouragement and assurance of the promises and plans of God and walks them through the coming two-act deliverance that God will provide: first from exile, then from sin.
- The first act, deliverance from exile, will be accomplished through the unexpected means of a pagan emperor: Cyrus.
- The second act, deliverance from sin, will also be accomplished through an unexpected means: a Servant who will bear and die for the sins of the people then rise again in victory to become a source of cleansing and provide a way to be at peace with God (...wait, wasn't this what happened for Isaiah...).
 - A Servant, sent by God the Father and indwelled with the Spirit, will do on a larger scale what was done for Isaiah in chapter 6: provide atonement and the taking away of guilt.
 - The judgment of exile won't fix the heart of the people, but the work of this Servant, who will take the judgment of God for the people, can fix their hearts.
 - The section about deliverance from exile ended with "there is no peace" (48:22), but, in the section about deliverance from sin, it is said of the Servant, "upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace" (53:5).
 - He will make a way for all the promises to come true.

Isaiah 56-66 - The Book of the Conqueror

A - 56:1-8 - The Servants - Called to Righteousness

B - 56:9-59:15a - The Inability of the People

C - 59:15b-21 - The Divine Warrior Goes to Battle

D - 60 - Future Glory

E - 61:1-3 - The Servant

D' - 61:4-62:12 - Future Glory

C' - 63:1-6 - The Divine Warrior Wins the Battle

B' - 63:7-66:17 - The Ability of the Lord

A' - 66:18–24 - The Servants - Clothed in Righteousness

- The final section is written as if to the people who return from exile, who are in between the first and second act, wondering when these things, these promises, will be fulfilled and what they are to do in the meantime. To them, he gives a call to pursue justice and righteousness as they wait for the promises.
- The promises will be fulfilled. The Servant will come. The deliverance from exile was a guarantee of a greater deliverance to come. The question of hope at the beginning of the book is answered by the certainty of hope at the end.
- The question to them is the same as it has been, “Who will you trust?”
- And, if they didn’t get the point by 55, 56-66 makes it clear who this Servant has to be. It has to be God himself who will step into history to redeem his people, bringing this greater act of deliverance.
- The Servant passage of 61:1-3, which makes the point that all the promises of 60-62 are made possible by the Servant, is flanked by Divine (lone) Warrior passages to say that this Servant is the Divine Warrior: God Himself, God the Son, come to make this all possible and do what we cannot do.

NT Use of Isaiah

- And this transitions us perfectly into the NT use of Isaiah, for Matthew got it. His first quote from the Old Testament comes from Isaiah, from the promise of “Immanuel,” “God with us” (Is. 7:14; Matt. 1:23). God had to come as one of us to do what we cannot do: save us. And Matthew understood that this was the greater act of deliverance, for, in the verses immediately before he quotes Isaiah, he tells the reader that the angel told Joseph that this child was “from the Holy Spirit” (20) and that “he will save the people from their sins” (21). The Servant, the greater act of deliverance, the one sent by God and indwelled with the Spirit, had arrived.
- Jesus himself says he is the Promised Servant when he chooses to read from Is. 61:1-3 and says, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). Notice that it is Is. 61:1-3, the mountaintop of 56-66, on which the Servant stands as the one who fulfills and makes possible all the promises of God. The Divine Warrior has come to fight for his people to deliver them.
- But all throughout his ministry, it is clear that the people missed the point that the Messiah, the Servant, had to accomplish the work of Isaiah 53 first before the other promises could be fulfilled. He had to take the judgment for them, had to take their sins on himself and take the punishment for them, so that they could be cleansed of those sins and have a new heart and be given the “pouring of the Spirit.”
- Their hearts needed to change. His message fell on deaf ears, just as Isaiah’s message had. Their heart was still the problem, and their rejection of him was proof-positive that he, the Servant, was needed.
- The hard hearts, the rejection, that Isaiah was promised in Is. 6:9-10 is quoted about the experience of Jesus in his ministry in Mat. 13, Mk. 4, Lk. 8, and Jn. 12. The people’s hearts still needed to change.
- After the promise of the Servant in Is. 49:1-13, Zion disbelieves (49:14). After Jesus declares himself to be the Servant in Luke 4, the people, his people, his hometown, disbelieves. The Servant is sorely needed!
- And, so, we read in the gospels that he fulfilled Is. 53. He was crucified for the sin of the people. He died for us. But, just as Is. 53:10 promised, he came back to life and now intercedes for us (Is. 53:12; Rom. 8:34).
- And, just as we saw in Isaiah that his work will make a way for the pouring of the Spirit (Is. 44; 55), so Jesus promises that it is better for him to go (John 16:7) so that the Spirit may come. And, in Acts 2, at Pentecost, the Spirit comes down and indwells those who believe.

- The message of Isaiah for those who wait for the fulfillment of the promises (56-66) is also picked up in many ways to us, as we still wait for the fulfillment of the rest of the promises.
 - The opening of the final section of Isaiah starts with a short list of beatitudes, or “blessed be” phrases, in Is. 56:2 . So, Jesus, in Matt. 5, also gives us beatitudes as we wait.
 - In Is. 56:1, the people are called to “keep justice and do righteousness” while they wait for the coming salvation; so, we are called to “love God” (righteousness) and love others (justice).
 - In Is. 59:17, the Divine Warrior, the Servant puts on the helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness. In Is. 11, the Messiah puts on the belt of righteousness and faithfulness. In Is. 49:2, the Servant, indwelt with the Spirit and speaking the Word of the Lord, is said to have a mouth (or words) like a sharp sword...does all this sound like the “armor of God” in Eph. 6?
 - The point of Is. 56-66 is that the Servant, the Divine Warrior, fights for us and gives us the strength to stand. We are to put on his armor, to put on Christ (Rom. 13:14), be “in Christ,” indwelt by the Spirit that he sent. He is our strength. It is not our armor; it is him.
- Another theme picked up in the NT is God’s passion that his house will become known as a “house of prayer for all peoples” (Is. 56:7). This is Jesus’ same concern in his day.
 - The outer courtyard of the temple was supposed to be the area where foreigners could come and pray. But by Jesus’ day, it had been turned into a marketplace. Jesus evicts the merchants from the temple court and quotes this line from v. 7 regarding the appropriate use of the house of God (see Matt 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17, and Luke 19:45–46).
 - This message of Gentile inclusion in Isaiah is part of Peter’s “aha!” moment in Acts 10:34-35, as he speaks words that sound a lot like a summary of Is. 56:3-8 and also Is. 64:5.
 - In Acts 15, when what was needed for Gentiles to be saved was being discussed, James stands up and uses a couple quotes from Isaiah (43:7; 45:21) in a compilation of the words of the prophets to say that God had promised that he would rebuild the tent of David and that this rebuilt tent would include Gentiles; so, they should not trouble them with more than minimal requirements.
- In fact, the whole progression and spread of the gospel in Acts echoes the progression of Is. 6-27.
 - In 6-27, God’s purpose of restoration after judgment begins with Isaiah then spreads to Judah, Israel, and finally to the ends of the earth.
 - This sounds a lot like Acts 1:8, where Christ, after he had taken the judgment, or punishment, for our sins, told his apostles, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” We see this progression fulfilled in the book of Acts.
- Lastly, we talked last week about how Isaiah 56-66 is similar to Revelation, especially the opening verses of 56 and the opening/closing verses of Rev., in its call to be faithful while we wait for the fulfillment of the promises.
 - I would challenge you to read through especially Rev. 21-22 and look at all the cross-references to Isaiah. There are more promises yet to be fulfilled, and, if the book of Isaiah has one main message, it would be that we can trust that every single one of those promises will come true, and in an even greater way than we can imagine.