

The Prophet Isaiah

Isaiah lived in the times of Uzziah, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah – round about 740 to 680 BC. This was the period when the Assyrian Empire was growing in power, and Judah was about to be invaded by King Sennacherib. Isaiah lived in royal circles (he was a great friend and advisor of King Hezekiah), and had a wife and children in Jerusalem.

In the opening chapter of his book Isaiah, like a doctor, carries out a health check on the nation of Judah (the southern kingdom), and finds them most unhealthy. “The whole head is sick”, he cried, “and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds” Isaiah 1:5, 6. The cause of their spiritual sickness was a wrong attitude to God. They thought if they offered plenty of expensive sacrifices, they could carry on making money by extortion and fraud, and God would turn a blind eye. It is a common mistake. God is not interested in expensive offerings. He wants our hearts – our full and complete surrender to His will. Yes, He will forgive us, but we have to show our repentance by changing our lives. Then He will wash away our sins, and we will be as clean as new fallen snow.

The second chapter bursts into a glorious vision of Jerusalem as it will be “in the latter days”, with all peoples travelling to God’s new Temple to be taught His laws, and international justice dispensed and enforced so effectively that war ceases. But first there has to be a cleansing of human pride, and a day of judgment– “The haughty looks of man shall be brought low”, says the prophet, “and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.” Isaiah 2:11.

Already we have tasted a pattern of how the prophets spoke. They have a strong, urgent message for their own day, but they also push us into the future, the Kingdom of God, when the ideals that the Bible teaches will be first taught, then enforced, so that God’s will is done all over the globe. In this way we are given hope. Even if today we see the triumph of evil and suffer under it, we know that God has a plan that will put everything right. As He said to Moses, “the whole earth will be filled with His glory”. And Isaiah echoes this theme -

“Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD; in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the LORD, the God of Israel. From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One”. Isaiah 24:15, 16

The sixth chapter has a fascinating record of the commissioning of the prophet. It is the last year of King Uzziah. Isaiah sees a vision of the Lord on His throne, surrounded by fiery seraphim – the throne was the golden “mercy seat” in the Most Holy place of the Temple – and his mouth is symbolically cleansed by the touch of a coal from the bronze altar. Then he is sent forth to preach God’s word. But, depressingly, he is told in advance he will not convince the people. *“And he said, ‘Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.””* Isaiah 6:9.

Did you know this classic verse is quoted time and again in the New Testament? Jesus and the Apostles faced exactly the same situation. Like Isaiah, they diligently spoke the words of God, but people behaved as if they had suddenly become blind and deaf. Only a tiny minority had the humility to stop and enquire, and the faith to believe and be saved.

The next section of the prophet has been titled the “Emmanuel” prophecy, because it has the theme “God is with us”. It belongs to the time of King Ahaz, a feeble young ruler who found his kingdom attacked by a coalition from Syria and the Ten-tribe kingdom of Israel. The king is confronted by the prophet outside the walls of Jerusalem, and warned not to depend on the Assyrian king coming to his aid. God is with us, he insists. He will even give us a sign to give us confidence – a virgin will have a baby (Isaiah 7:14) and call his name “Emmanuel” (“God with us”). The Assyrian will not save you, warns the prophet. In fact he will conquer your kingdom, rising like a river in flood to fill the land. The Lord acts like a rock in the highway. Either He trips people up so that their pride is brought low, or, if they choose to believe in Him, it gives them shelter.

Suddenly Isaiah breaks out into a song of joy. In the gloomy north of Israel, first to feel the power of the invader, light will dawn, and God will send a champion to rescue His people –

“ ... Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light ... 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 Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.” Isaiah 9:1-7

How do we understand these cryptic phrases? Well, in the first place God did rescue Judah from the Assyrians in the time of Isaiah. Good King Hezekiah

persuaded his people to trust in God (unlike his father Ahaz), and the angel of the Lord decimated the Assyrian army, as we read in Kings and Chronicles. But there is more to these words than that. We need to read Bible prophecy with two pairs of spectacles. We put on our short-range reading glasses and see a message for the prophet’s day. Then we put on long-distance lenses and read the same words again. This time we see another message that belongs to the time of Christ. He was miraculously born of a virgin, Mary. He was Immanuel, God with us, here on earth, for in him, as John says in the New Testament, the glory of God was revealed for three and a half years. But Jesus, born to be king on the throne of David, and who will one day reign there forever, as Isaiah sang, had first to do battle. He had to fight, not with Gentile armies, but with Sin, the great oppressor that holds us all in his grip. And guess what? The Good News (Gospel) of the salvation he was bringing came, just as the prophet predicted, to Galilee first. Every detail makes sense, for Isaiah was inspired by the Spirit of God.

Chapters 15 to 23 comprise a series of ‘oracles’ about the nations surrounding Judah, who were also to feel the rod of Assyria on their backs. Here too are messages about the ‘latter days’. It seems sometimes we even need three pairs of spectacles, one for the time of Hezekiah, a second for news about the first century work of Jesus, and a third for the time of the end.

We move on to a new section from chapter 24 to 35 in which Isaiah hits out at the clumsy attempts by some politicians in Judah to protect themselves from the growing Assyrian threat by a league with Egypt, the ancient superpower to the south. This move, the prophet warns his contemporaries, would end in disaster. But now, put on the

alternative spectacles. Look again. This time we are being warned of another grand theme of the prophets – a time just before the Day of Judgment, when Israel, re-gathered from dispersion among the nations, would face an invasion, not from Assyria, but a coalition from the distant north. This latter-day invasion will crush the proud nation, and they will be rescued only by the appearing of their King.

This part of Isaiah ends with a psalm of joy –

“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.’ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert ...”
Isaiah 35:4-6

Those of you who know the New Testament well will already recognize an allusion to the work of Jesus in healing the sick. Yet this fulfilment of Isaiah’s words was only a foretaste of the great work Jesus will do when he comes again as King. He will open the eyes of Israel, which have been blind for centuries to the word of the Lord. And he will bring life from the dead for those who died in faith, giving them new bodies, forever free from pain and sorrow.

There is now a chunk of Isaiah that is quite different. It is part of his ‘official’ record of the reign of Hezekiah. It stretches from chapter 36 to 39, and parallel with Kings and Chronicles, gives yet another insight into the momentous confrontation with Sennacherib.

We move on to the most glorious and poetic part of the whole book – the ‘Servant’ chapters, which run from chapter 40 to 54. In this section Isaiah is

able as a prophet to look far into the future. He foresees a time when Judah has been conquered and taken into captivity in Babylon (he did this before, in chapter 14). He sees the morale of the people at rock-bottom. Even the faithful few in the nation would have their confidence knocked away when the Temple was burnt, and King Zedekiah dragged off into captivity, leaving the throne of David empty. Had not God sworn the dynasty of David would last forever? Could it be, perish the thought, that the gods of Babylon had proved stronger than the God of Israel? Isaiah with biting sarcasm rejects the helplessness of gods made from wood and metal. How could they save anybody? Israel’s God is eternal, and all-powerful. Wait long enough, he insists, and your faith in Him will be rewarded. Israel will return from Babylon, and life will go on again, and God will one day send the Saviour King. There is a wonderful refrain in these chapters which points to Jesus as the Servant of God, the one who would obey His every command, and who would in consequence be rewarded with eternal life and victory. In the course of that obedience, the Servant would bow his will to his heavenly Father’s, to the point of crucifixion and undeserved death. By a dreadful irony, the Servant, rejected by the people he came to save, would die for them, bearing their sins away on his own shoulders. Isaiah 53 has some of the most exquisite fulfilled prophecies in the Old Testament. It predicts Jesus’ silence during his trial, the scourging, the buffeting by the soldiers, the piercing, and his burial in a rich man’s grave. You may remember it was this very passage which Philip the Evangelist used to convince the Ethiopian eunuch about Jesus in Acts 8:27-35. Dear reader, grab your Bible and start reading. These have to be the words of God.

The great prophet concludes his book with a diatribe against the iniquities of Judah (although set last in the book, this seems to belong to a period before the Servant chapters). It warns of impending judgment by a saddened God. Yet it carries interspersed, as ever, a message of hope, and a vision of the Restoration and the last days, when Israel's sins would be pardoned, and Jesus would come to redeem them.

"And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the LORD. "And as for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD: "My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children's offspring," says the LORD, "from this time forth and for evermore."
Isaiah 59:20, 21

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