

Ecclesiastes-Isaiah: God Guides His People Through Poets and Prophets - Lesson 2

Isaiah: A Case Study of God's Prophetic Voice

I. Introduction to Prophetic Literature

A. The Prophets.

With the book of Isaiah, we come to that wonderful and very large block of material in the Old Testament that we call "the Prophets", sixteen books: a group of prophets called the Major Prophets, of which Isaiah is one example. They are called major simply because they are bigger, derived from the Old Latin word *maior* ("major"). Then twelve Minor Prophets are called minor simply because they are shorter, "minor" in the sense of smaller or shorter.

The Prophets have a knowledge of, a sense of, and a deep concern for the sweep of history. Again and again and again when you are reading the Prophets, you have got to be something of a historian. Indeed, it might happen that your study of the Prophets would help you learn to like history and to benefit from it, if it has not been something that you have been inclined toward in the past. The Prophets are not commenting generally on things in some abstract way; they are commenting as God inspires them to do so and gives them the very words to say on the way things are going in this world. They are talking about their world, the world that came before them, the world that is coming after them, the world of the future, and even the time when this world is done away with and the new world will come into being, which we will have if we know Christ as Savior and Lord.

The Prophets recognize, as many other parts of the Bible do, that there really are epochs of history; there are broad times in which God works with people. There was the Creation and the pre-history, the time before God destroyed most humans in the Flood (Genesis 1-11). There was the time of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons, in Genesis 12-50, in which God worked through His covenant with them. There was the time of the covenant of Moses, made at Mount Sinai and renewed in the book of Deuteronomy, that carried the Israelites all the way through to the time of the exile. Then there was that epoch of destruction and death and deportation. After God's judgment was complete, there was the time of restoration where God's blessings were underway for the new age. Now the prophets also looked forward to the age that we are in. It is what they, and indeed the New Testament writers also, called the latter days or the last days. And the prophets can look forward to eternal life.

B. Prophetic Patterns.

When we study the Prophets, we need to appreciate the fact that they have got the big picture in mind. Particularly, this becomes important because the Prophets sometimes speak of blessing as past and sometimes of blessing as future. They also will typically speak of punishment and distress and hardship as future or past, depending on when the prophet was inspired by God to write. It can be confusing. You may wonder if this prophet is talking about blessing, is this a past blessing or a future blessing? This prophet seems to be saying wrath and destruction is coming in this chapter, but seems to be saying in the chapter that follows it that

all kinds of good things are coming. Well, what is going on is simply that the prophet in one chapter or a portion of a chapter is speaking about one of these epochs, and in another place is speaking of another. Knowing the big picture, knowing that the Prophets are looking now at this aspect of history and now at this other aspect of history, will at least alert you to the fact that you have to know which is which. A good commentary, a good Bible aid, will often clue you in as to which is which.

Appreciate, then, the pattern that generally dominates in the Prophets, that of blessing-curse-blessing. The blessing is from the creation of Israel as a people at Mount Sinai right up to 586 B.C. when Israel ceases to be a nation. The era of curse is from 586 to 516 B.C.: from the destruction of the temple Solomon had built to the rebuilding of the new temple, the second temple, and the exile that is covered in that period. The period of blessing that comes afterwards is the period of restoration blessing, which includes our own day; and of course, Jesus of Nazareth is the focal point and the Creator, the one around whose death and resurrection that period of restoration blessing revolves.

II. Isaiah the Prophet.

Isaiah preached in the eighth century and the very early years of the seventh century B.C.; in other words, from the late 700s down to the early 600s B.C. He is one of the earliest prophets, but not the earliest. Hosea is presumably the earliest, or maybe Amos (one of those two), but Isaiah is one of the earliest and his book is certainly massive, 66 chapters. It looks at the period before the exile, the period of original blessing. It looks at the exile and it also looks at the period of the beginning part of the restoration lessons. Then it looks further into the era that we are in, our New Testament era, the idea of the newly created people, the new creation that the New Testament refers to relatively often. So, Isaiah certainly has a lot to say about these various epochs of history.

As a preacher of God's Word, Isaiah is going to be speaking of either "weal" or "woe" most of the time. These two words that begin with "w" are just convenient ways for us to understand the prophetic books. "Weal" is that which is good, things that are nice, things that are positive, things that are happy, things that we will all rejoice in and be comforted by. "Woe," of course, refers to those things that are difficult, hard, negative, disastrous, and so on. Isaiah has a lot of "woe" and a lot of "weal." There is some of each all throughout the material that we have in the sixty-six chapters of his great book.

III. Prophecies of Condemnation (1:1-35:10).

A. Introduction and Early Prophecies (1:1-5:30).

At the beginning, there is a little more woe than weal. Isaiah does have, after the introductory section in which he prophesied against external worship (just going through the forms rather than really loving God and worshiping Him in a heartfelt manner) in chapter 1, a section of what is sometimes called early prophecies. These are in chapters 2-5. These early prophecies contain mention of God's kingdom, the theme of the Day of the Lord, a day in which God intervenes to set things right. So that means if you are not on His side, even if you are Israel and you are not on His side, you are in big trouble. But if you are on His side, He rescues and delivers you. He

also preaches in those chapters against haughty women in Jerusalem. An awful lot of the prophecies may seem directed against various male leaders, but there were plenty of influential women who also needed to be brought up short and made right with God.

In chapter 5, we come to a rather famous portion of the book. It is rather famous because it captures in a musical poem some of the essence of what Isaiah says, also very brilliantly in many other places. I want to read just a little part of that to capture some of the flavor. He is speaking for God and he says this, "I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. . . . Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. 'Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between my vineyard and me. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it.'" And then this explanation: "The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress."

So here we have in this poetic format, this musical poem, a song that tells a story. God gave His people all kinds of benefits. He cared for them, he cultivated them as it were, but what did they do? Soon enough, and in various ways for a long time, they turned against His covenant, and they broke His laws. They produced a kind of injustice socially and a wickedness personally that disobedience to God's covenant does lead people to produce. It will be His plan now to get rid of it. He will make that beautiful vineyard into a wasteland. It is the story of Israel. God gave them everything and He looked for them to respond, but instead they broke His covenant. And so now, He is going to send them into exile. He is going to turn their land into a burned-out wasteland, as was indeed the case in Judah when the Babylonians finally did conquer it.

He looked for justice, but He saw bloodshed for righteousness, but He heard cries of distress. If you are a person with a passion for social justice, you will see that Isaiah is too, not because he made it up, but because he is stating the concern for social justice that God Himself has and had at that time. If on the other hand, you are a person with a concern, as you should also have, for personal righteousness, you will see that that is in here, too. If you have a concern for proper worship, you will see this is a big theme in this book. If you have a concern for what God will do in the future to make things right, that is here.

If you have a concern for how God will rescue this world from sin and how He will make provision for people to be able to live righteously, that is here as well in the wonderful predictions of the Messiah. There are just all kinds of things that the book addresses. Isaiah is a person who God allowed to see many, many things.

B. Inaugural Vision (6:1-13).

In chapter 6 comes- his inaugural vision, his commissioning vision. This is where he sees a vision of God in the temple and he hears the sound, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." God calls him to be His preacher, to preach His Word as a prophet. And he says, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Well, God reassures him with a symbolic burning to clean up his lips and sends him out to speak to the Israelites and He says this, "'Be ever hearing, but never understanding.' That is your message that you give to them, Isaiah. 'Ever hearing, but never understanding; ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull, close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

What is God saying there? Is this some kind of negative thing that Isaiah's supposed to give, an obscure message that will not help anybody to hear the truth or to see it or understand it? No, just the opposite. What God is saying is that the Israelites have become like the idols that they have worshiped. The idols have eyes, but they cannot see anything. The idols have ears, but they do not really hear anything. And the idols have mouths, but they cannot say anything. They have got all the organs, as it were, of the head, that are supposed to be related to perception; but they really cannot perceive. And God's people have become like that; they have become like their idols. And so God is saying to Isaiah, "You are going to preach My Word. I am calling you to do it, but it is not going to be easy. You have got a very big challenge ahead of you."

C. Present World Empires and Coming Kingdom of God (7:1-12:6).

In chapters 7-12, Isaiah preaches God's Word regarding the present world empires of his day and the coming kingdom of God. In those chapters, we have the wonderful prediction of the coming of Immanuel in chapter 7 for example, Immanuel meaning "God with us," God in our very midst, God helping us, all those overtones. In chapter 9, there is the wonderful prediction of the Messiah's birth. The nation of Israel in Isaiah's time was shrinking. The Assyrians, the great superpower of that day, were constantly pushing and encroaching on its borders and were dropping it down to a smaller and smaller size. In much of the time that Isaiah ministered, northern Israel had been reduced down to just the tribal district of Ephraim and its capital city, Samaria. There was not a lot left; most of the nation had been incorporated into the Assyrian Empire and was under full and complete Assyrian domination.

Yet, in that very context, Isaiah can speak God's words of comfort, saying there will be no more gloom for those in distress. In the past, He humbled the land of Zebulun and Naphtali (those were parts of northern Israel now crushed and controlled by the Assyrians). And yet, He is coming in the future to honor Galilee of the Gentiles, as part of Israel had then come to be called. Then, he talks about the great light that people will see. He talks about people rejoicing at this. He talks about the defeat of the enemy. He talks about the fact that this will not happen by military means at all. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He

will reign on David's throne", a son of David, in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant promise in 2 Samuel 7. And He will reign forever. "The zeal of the Lord will accomplish this."

In the midst of times of great gloom and trial and distress, some of which Isaiah announced and talked about and dealt with and explained to the people, there was also this constant holding before the people the restoration lesson. Yes, the current blessings are coming to an end. Yes, the nation is headed inexorably, because of its sins, for a time of curse. But God will never forget them. They are His people and He has plans for them in the future that are so wonderful; they are far beyond anything that they have conceived of at present. Think of it, a Messiah coming whose reign will never end, who will be the true descendant of David, who will establish and uphold justice and righteousness always. What a great prospect!

D. Oracles Against Foreign Nations (13 :1-23:18).

In chapters 13 -23, there are placed together a great many of the oracles against foreign nations that the prophet spoke. What is the purpose of these oracles? Does God just kind of hate foreign countries and cause His prophet to attack them in various ways? No, God loves all countries of the world, but those that have opposed Israel, those that have sought to oppress His people, must be punished for that. He is punishing His own people, after all, for their sins. Oppressor nations must be gotten off the back of the Israelites; they must be suppressed. They must be lowered in their influence, so that God's people can be elevated to the position of grace and glory that He has in mind for them, a glory shared with Him as He manifests His presence among them.

E. Isaiah's "Little Apocalypse" (24:1-27:13).

In chapters 24-27, we have something that is often called the Isaianic Apocalypse. Apocalyptic literature, about which we will talk further in this course in another segment, is the kind of literature that gives a sense of the sweep of history and the outcome of history by many sorts of symbols. One sees Isaiah, at God's behest, encouraging the people with these apocalyptic sorts of prophetic oracles or messages.

IV. Historical Parenthesis (36:1-39:8).

Chapters 36-39 of the book are historical. They are shared with the book of 2 Kings. In these chapters, one sees Isaiah having interaction especially with King Hezekiah, encouraging him, supporting him during the invasion of a very powerful Assyrian king, Sennacherib. You know, though the Assyrians captured virtually everything in the whole Fertile Crescent, there was a little ring around Jerusalem that they couldn't get. Little Judah, tiny and insignificant relative to most of the world of that day, did remain independent when the juggernaut of the Assyrian army rolled over everybody else.

V. Prophecies of Comfort (40:1-66:24).

A. New Exodus (40:1-31).

There is a sense in which the book takes on a new focus with chapter 40. That focus is not a new theological focus, and it is not a different aspect of the basic sense of how God works with His people, but with chapter 40 an awful lot concentrates on the return from exile. God caused

Isaiah, or some disciple, to gather those prophecies Isaiah had made that related to the time after the Babylonian exile and put them together starting with chapter 40. So chapter 40 opens with these very lovely words, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." In other words, she is fully and completely past the period of curse.

Well, what is supposed to happen now? Isaiah is looking forward to the day when the Israelites will no longer be kept in bondage in exile. Well, what they are supposed to do is return; they are supposed to return to the Lord, return to His favor. Physically they can return to Judah and Jerusalem and rebuild it, and Isaiah has a lot of prophecies anticipating that. These were prophecies we believe encouraged the returning exiles, as they had the opportunity under the Persians, who took over from the Babylonians, who had taken over from the Assyrians to return. Under the more loose policies of the Persians, the Israelites were able to go back to their homeland; and, following the encouragement of the Word of God in Isaiah 40 and following, people did that in waves.

B. Servant Songs (42:1-9; 49:1-13 ; 50:4-11 ; 52:13 -53:12).

In chapters 42, 49, 50 and 52, we encounter something that is dear to most of us who know Christ, and that is four lovely poems called "servant songs." Perhaps the most famous of these is Isaiah 53, in which we read this kind of thing: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of his has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Who is this figure? Well, we know that it is Jesus Christ, if we know the New Testament. So many quotations there tell us that. But an ancient Israelite who was thoughtful could figure it out too. One could see that in these servant songs many of the same kinds of vocabulary words and themes related to Moses as the suffering servant of Israel are turned around, transformed into predictions of a new leader of the people, one who will give a new exodus to them, one who will be part of a new creation of a people that God will bless and stay with and love forever. That is what Isaiah is talking about.

C. Zion's Glory and Shame (56:1-66:24).

In the final chapters of the book, chapters 56-66, Isaiah concentrates on Zion. Zion is a theme of heaven. And Isaiah brings this theme to special heights with his speeches about, sometimes, Zion's glory, but also, sadly, sometimes Zion's shame. If the people of God will honor Him and do what is right, keep His covenant, look forward to his Messiah and the salvation He will bring, all kinds of blessings will be theirs and Zion's glory will shine. But if they will not, if they will refuse to repent, if they will stay in their sins, if they will follow hollow ritual as opposed to heartfelt worship, then they will bring shame on Zion. So the book ends with a challenge: Which will it be? Will it be the glory of Zion, or will it be its shame?