

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Isaiah

March 23, 2014

Introducing Isaiah

The books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel are called the Major Prophets not because of a particular rank the prophets held in the Israeli military, nor because they were more important than other prophets in the Old Testament, but because their books are longer. That's it! (Lamentations, a short song of sorrow written by Jeremiah, is also included in this group.) These books provide four powerful pictures of hope. Each one contrasts our true hope in God with other things that can look alluring but that finally disappoint.

Isaiah has sixty-six chapters. And with the exception of four chapters in the middle, the entire book is made up of poetry, oracles, and prophecy. Chapters 1-35 consist of prophecy and poetry about God and his expression toward his people. Then in chapters 36-39, this middle section, the poetry stops and a drama of an historical event is recorded: the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians. In chapters 40-66, the prophecy and poetry return. On a broad scale, we can say that the first half of Isaiah (1-35) contains more doom and gloom, while the second half (40-66) offers more reason for hope. Yet in all of it, the people of Judah are enticed to trust in things they should not trust in.

The book does not occur in *strict* chronological order. Sometimes people, particularly young Christians, turn to the Old Testament and assume that it flows in chronological order, and that whatever they read about in chapter 4 must have occurred after what they read about in chapter 2. But that's not the case in a book like Isaiah. Having said that, we will see that it does follow a *general* historical order.

The book was written during the second half of the eighth century B.C. (approximately 750-700 B.C.). During that time, five different kings reigned in the southern kingdom of Judah, the kingdom built around Jerusalem.

Isaiah's ministry began at the end of King Uzziah's reign, and we think it ended during King Manasseh's reign. Uzziah had reigned for fifty-two years. He was a great king who, in many ways, brought the splendor of Solomon back to the nation (Solomon had been gone for two centuries). During Uzziah's reign, Judah's historically mighty neighbor to the southwest, Egypt, had been faltering; while its

up-and-coming mighty neighbor to the northeast, Assyria, was preoccupied with other matters. So Uzziah took advantage of the situation by regaining territory and political prestige for the nation of Judah. His death, around 745 B.C., then left something of a power vacuum. Isaiah describes the beginning of his own ministry in chapter 6 with these famous words, “In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on the throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple” (6:1).

King Jotham, Uzziah’s son, followed; he reigned for sixteen years and continued his father’s programs.

King Ahaz, Jotham’s son, succeeded him and also reigned sixteen years. By this point, the Assyrian empire had grown in strength and imperial ambition. It gobbled up the northern kingdom and eventually pushed its borders to within eight miles of the walls of Jerusalem. Ahaz then made a bad decision. He decided to put his trust in the Assyrian emperor. So he made a treaty with him, paid tribute to him, and even sent Israelites to Assyria to study their styles of worship to bring back to Jerusalem! In short, he made Judah a vassal of Assyria and Assyria’s gods. Ahaz died around 715 B.C.

Ahaz’s son Hezekiah followed him, and King Hezekiah reigned twenty-nine years as one of Judah’s best kings. It was during his reign that the main historical crisis of the book of Isaiah occurred: the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians (chapters 36-37). In a sense, Hezekiah provoked the siege of Jerusalem exactly because he was a godly king. He would not abide the false worship or false gods of his father’s reign any longer. Instead, he led the nation in putting their hope once more in the Lord by refusing to pay tribute to the foreign king. In response, almost two hundred thousand Assyrian troops descended upon the land of Palestine. They wiped out fortified city after fortified city until Jerusalem was fairly well alone and surrounded. We will come back to this story later.

Hezekiah’s evil son Manasseh followed him, and he reigned fifty-five years. Tradition has it that early in King Manasseh’s reign, he captured and imprisoned Isaiah because he hated Isaiah’s prophecies against the false worship that Manasseh encouraged. Tradition also says that the king had Isaiah sawn in two, which may be what the author of Hebrews refers to when he speaks of great individuals of the faith being sawn in two (Hebrews 11:37).

But this book is not finally about the geopolitical situation of Isaiah’s day. That is simply the stage on which the drama of Isaiah unfolded. The prophet is very clear

as to what his vision is about. The book begins, “The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (1:1). It is a vision about Judah and Jerusalem. Specifically, it’s about Judah and Jerusalem’s rebellion: “See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her – but now murderers!” (1:21).

God uses Isaiah to pronounce these types of condemnations on his people throughout the book. In chapter 5, they are called a vineyard which, though planted by God, yields only bad fruit (5:4). God “looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress” (5:7).

In chapter 59, Isaiah tells the people, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (59:2).

Isaiah 59:7-8 (cf. Romans 3:15-17)

Isaiah 64:6-7

That was the situation in which God called Isaiah to be a prophet. Concerning the people of Isaiah’s day, we want to know what both the problem and solution were. Concerning us, we want to know in whom shall we place our trust and hope? This is what we want to learn from Isaiah.

The Problem: Trusting the Wrong Things

So how did the people of God specifically rebel? In short, God’s people trusted in the wrong things. We see that back at the very beginning of the book.

Isaiah 1:2-4

Trusting other kings

When the people of Judah turned their backs on God, to whom did they turn? They turned to foreign kings. As the Assyrian threat became more and more real, they wanted to trust the king of Egypt. He had chariots and horsemen (see chapter 36). He could help. Right? Wrong! Isaiah warns, “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the Lord” (31:1). Then two verses later: “But the Egyptians are men and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit. When the

Lord stretches out his hand, he who helps will stumble, he who is helped will fall; both will perish together” (31:3).

Then they trusted in the king of Assyria. Ahaz made a treaty with Assyria to be Judah’s overlord and protector – to keep them safe.

Then, when that whole Assyria thing didn’t work out, they trusted in Babylon. In the first half of the book (1-39), Assyria is the region’s prevailing superpower. But by the middle of the book, soon after the siege of Jerusalem is lifted, Assyria begins to crumble and Babylon begins to emerge. In the second half of the book, then, Babylon is more prominent. Two Babylonian ambassadors visit Hezekiah in Judah in chapter 39, perhaps to get him to join into a treaty against Assyria. It’s around this time, or shortly thereafter, that the Jewish nation begins trusting in Babylon to help them.

Trusting other gods

Not only did the Jews trust in other kings, they trusted in other gods. So throughout the book, Isaiah attacks the people’s idolatry. The people are “full of superstitions” (2:6). “Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their fingers have made” (2:8). Clearly, Isaiah wants them to see the stupidity of what they are doing” “You are worshiping what your hands have made!” Yet that is exactly what happens when you or I worship something our hands produce, whether money, jobs, or even our children: the “creator” worships something he has “created.” Chapters 41, 44, 57, and 65 all have long sections about idolatry, where the people worshiped and gave themselves over to things that were not God.

Trusting themselves

Of course, the people and their leaders did not simply trust foreign kings and foreign gods, they trusted themselves. In chapter 22, Isaiah observes that as the people prepared to defend themselves (a good thing), they did not simultaneously trust in God to be their defender (a very bad thing!).

Isaiah 22:8-11

Isaiah 29:10-16

Trusting their own unfaithful leaders

The people even trusted, in the wrong way, the good gifts that God gave them – their own leaders, for instance. When the leaders’ plans differed from God’s plans,

the people should have demonstrated whom they truly trusted by refusing to follow their leaders into disobedience (see 3:1-3, 14). But they didn't; they followed their leaders.

Whenever God's appointed leader takes the people of God away from God's ways, we must not follow him. Our primary allegiance must remain with God. Ahaz was one king in a line of kings installed by God. Yet he forsook God. And the people followed him.

Whom shall we trust?

As Christians, we are not exactly the Old Testament people of Judah, but we are similar. We are God's special people, and we are often tempted, individually and corporately, to put our trust in the wrong things.

In your own life, what motivates you? What are your real goals, your real ambitions, your real purposes? And what do you trust in to accomplish those ends?

What about the church? Many churches hope in many things other than God. Is it growth? In our culture, growing numbers – written figures – can be idols much more easily than carved figures. Do we assume that as long as the number of people walking through the door on Sunday morning increases we must be doing the right thing? What is the church tempted to trust in?

The Solution: Trusting God

God alone was the right focus of his people's hope, and therefore he alone was the right object of their trust.

In chapter 40, Isaiah sets the idols side by side with God in order to demonstrate the absolute futility and folly of trusting anything other than the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

Isaiah 40:18-25, 28)

The idols they had been trusting in were nothing compared to the real God!

It was no accident that Isaiah had his great vision of God when he did. When the king whom the people had trusted died, Isaiah was allowed to see the real king, seated high and lifted up.

Isaiah 6:1-4

This is the one whom God's people should have always trusted in. It was never to be a great political leader like Uzziah, as godly as he may have been. After all, he died! That's not an insignificant fact. God called them to trust himself alone, and he used Isaiah to show that he alone was uniquely worthy of their trust.

Trusting God's coming judgment

So he said he would come in judgment, both upon his own people and upon the nations. Much of this book is filled with oracles promising the judgment of God. "The Lord has a day of vengeance," Isaiah says (34:8).

In chapters 13-24, Isaiah promises God's judgment upon nation after nation. The thunder of God's wrath begins to roll in Babylon in chapter 13. It rolls on through Assyria, Moab, Damascus, Cush, Egypt, Babylon again, Edom, and Arabia in the following chapters. In chapter 22, Jerusalem hears the rumble of God's judgment. Tyre hears it in chapter 23. And then this vision of the storm of God's judgment reaches its cataclysmic finale in chapter 24.

Isaiah 24:1-3

Trusting God's coming deliverance and salvation

God alone should be trusted not only because he is the one who will bring judgment, he is also the one who will bring deliverance and salvation.

Immediately before the thunder of God's judgment sounds in chapter 13, Isaiah lets us hear a song that will be sung on a future day of deliverance: "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation."

He promises to save, and then he keeps his promise. The Assyrian troops had surrounded Jerusalem. And now, picking the story up, we find that the Assyrian commander proceeds to threaten the city's inhabitants, speaking in Hebrew. Several Israelite leaders ask the commander to speak in Aramaic, in order not to disturb the masses of listening Israelites, most of whom could not understand Aramaic, but he continues in Hebrew, wanting all the people to hear. He shouts, "Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, 'The Lord will deliver us.' Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries

has been able to save his land from me? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand?” (Isaiah 36:18-20).

Sure enough, in the very next chapter the Lord tells Isaiah to tell King Hezekiah to tell the king of Assyria what God thinks of Assyria’s threat.

Isaiah 37:23-29

And this is exactly what happens. God delivers Jerusalem from a hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrian troops.

Isaiah 37:36-38

When Jerusalem had no other hope, God came as their helper.

Whom shall we trust?

As we read through the book of Isaiah, we see that God is utterly unique. There is no one like him. No one else has the moral purity of God. No one else is as righteous as God. And yet no one else is as loving as God. Indeed, one of the most striking things about the book of Isaiah is the tenacity of God’s love for his unfaithful people. Again and again they turn from him and spurn him. They trust in other things. And again and again God tenaciously pursues them.

The Solution Sharpened: Hoping and Trusting in Christ

As you read through the book of Isaiah, it gradually becomes clear that God’s great plan for his people and for the world narrows in on one person. “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed” (28:16).

A stone? A tested stone? A precious cornerstone?

Hoping in a coming Messiah-King

In the first half of Isaiah, the prophet instructs the people to look to a messiah figure. Now, in the Old Testament, every king of Israel and Judah was a “messiah.” Messiah simply means “anointed one.” But this was the Messiah. This was the King of kings that God revealed to Isaiah. “A king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice” (32:1).

But this coming one would be far more than just a good king.

Isaiah 9:6-7

Indeed, this one called “Wonderful Counselor” and “Mighty God” would have the Spirit of God upon him in a special way: “The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (11:2; cf. 11:1-5)

Hoping in a coming servant

God promised his people this coming kingly figure; but as we continue reading into the second half of Isaiah, we find that another figure emerges, one that God calls “my servant.” This servant would also have God’s Spirit upon him, and he too would bring justice to the nations (see 42:1-4). He would also save both Jews and Gentiles, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth (see 49:1-7).

But not all things would be bright for this servant. He would listen to *God*, but not everyone would listen to *him*.

Isaiah 50:4-10a

The question that cries out throughout the book of Isaiah is this: how would a holy God forgive and restore the very people he charges with rebellion? They would even beat, mock, and spit upon this servant!

Well, the answer comes through this same servant, particularly in the remarkable passage we often read in church – Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Right now, let’s look at just the end? “After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities” (53:11). That very beating, mocking, and spitting, it turns out, would serve an unexpected end.

In Isaiah, God’s solution is not simply an abstract, unfocused picture of himself as a deliverer; it is a focused picture of a person, a servant. This servant listens perfectly to God and yet he suffers and is rejected in order to bear the sins of God’s people.

Hoping in Jesus as this one

And who is this one? In chapter 61, we are given a tremendous clue.

Isaiah 61:1-2

Then, hundreds of years after Isaiah wrote these words, Luke recorded this account in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. After describing the episode in which Jesus resists Satan's temptation in the wilderness, Luke proceeds to tell us about the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Luke 4:14-21

Isaiah 61 was fulfilled in Jesus! Jesus is the King. Jesus is the Servant. He came for us, his people.

Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament* (adapted with changes)