

Notes on Isaiah 13—23

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Chapters 13–14

All that God said through Isaiah about the nations that ignore him is being said now: they must endure his indignation. Wherever there is evil, pride or tyranny, there, God's fierce anger will be revealed. Because of the upheaval, each people group will have to scamper back to its own ethnic enclave (13:14) and abandon the benefits garnered from cooperation. God was specific and said the Medes, who had no use for gold, would make Babylon fall. The entire world would shudder.

In contrast to this, people of many nations would join themselves to Israel. These would be the people who relied on Israel's God and believed in Israel's Messiah. Some who were born to Israel would be cut off, and others who believed would be grafted in (Rom. 11:17–24). But the nations would bring Israel to her inheritance. Far from having to carve it out for themselves, the nations to whom they had been a blessing would conduct them to it. In such a manner, the people of God will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5; Rom. 4:13).

The holy people of God will then consider ancient Babylon, and all the later 'Babylons' that have walked in their steps. Her king ruled in anger and is now no more. He sought equality with God but has been gloated on among the dead. His progeny shall no longer trouble the earth.

If this was God's plan for Babylon, what of the immediate threat of Assyria? Their power would be annulled within Israel's borders. So Israel would see a little of God's plan for all the nations being worked out. Such is the confidence of God's people. As they are attacked, so shall their attackers learn of the gracious power of Israel's God—the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

King Ahaz, by his unbelief, had lost many of the gains made by his forefather David. Now he was dead. This prophecy suggests that Philistia, arch enemies of David and always agitating politically, had sent negotiators to the new king Hezekiah, seeking an ally in Israel to defeat Assyria. God had a message for them. The new king would be more trouble to them than David had been. The needy in Israel would be safe; Philistia would starve. It was because the Lord looked after his people that they could be confident in the face of Assyria; but Philistia who trusted in intrigue could enjoy no such hope.

Prayer

Lord of the nations, it is you who make a tree in which all peoples of the earth may roost. Your kingdom, under the reign of Christ is our only refuge. Though the nations rage, and though they boast of their successes, my hope shall be in you. May the poor of the earth find

refuge in you as a faithful Creator, and may they know the fellowship enjoyed within your kingdom. Amen.

Chapters 15–16

A river in Moab ran with the blood of a lost battle. A delegation, or government in exile at Sela, sought help and prepared their story for Jerusalem, and vulnerable refugees sought asylum in Judah. God also cried over the desolation (vv. 5 and 9, see Isa. 63:8–9), even though the trouble would deepen. Continuation of the judgment suggests that their leaders were still proud and that they sought aid on their own terms.

God's reply to all nations came in the shape of Israel's hope. Beyond Moab's trouble was the sure reign of God in the person of his Davidic King. This hope was as sure for Moab as for Israel (I Sam. 7:19). When the Messiah came, he died for the sins of the world demonstrating conclusively that the love of God had always encompassed all people.

Pride, conceit and more pride (16:6–8) characterised Moab; also insolence, a self-regard which cannot be contained within any limits. But boasts of their advances should be replaced with weeping. It was the Lord who brought an end to the vintage festivities, yet his heart moaned in concert with the people. In three years, all these prophecies would be fulfilled.

Christ has fleshed out these prophecies. He wept over Jerusalem. But on the cross, he wept with the world—revealing the mercy of his Father. God weeps over us when we have no love, when we think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, when we have no confidence in his protection, when we think he should fulfil our agendas. But he has established his King as a place of refuge, a Wonder Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of peace.

Prayer

Father, our nation and all nations seek their own welfare, pursue their own goals, vaunt their own greatness and seek the aid of others and of you to bring about their ends. Forgive us for the insolence that our nationalism hides. Behind the troubles we endure, may we see the sorrow you have over us, the love you have revealed in Christ and the sureness of your reign over all things. Father, we entrust ourselves to you now and ask that while we remain citizens of this world, you will teach us to seek first the kingdom of your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Chapters 17–18

Damascus had teamed with Northern Israel to secure themselves against Assyria. This may have seemed like sensible politics but Israel had turned from the God who had saved them. Their true glory had never been political or military strength but the Lord himself (Psa. 89:17; 3:3). The glory of their own making would waste away. Syria would suffer the same. God's people could not be useful in the world if they did not have the Lord. All this, as with all judgments, would direct the peoples of the world to their Maker (17:7). Israel would be like any other Amorite city destroyed when Israel conquered their land under Joshua. Only Israel's 'Rock' made her secure or fruitful.

Many nations are addressed (17:12), particularly, nations that attack those who trust in the Lord. Though they thunder like the sea, they shall be chased away as blown chaff.

An Ethiopian conquered Egypt briefly and, eager to secure his interests, sought alliances further North. If the nations should arrive at Jerusalem, the prophet's word to them would be that God was in the land ('his dwelling' here is on earth), meaning all the earth, to destroy their false trust. In fact, some from that nation would come to the Lord at Jerusalem with true worship.

The Babylon oracle showed that God organises history for the good of his people. The Philistia oracles showed that God would keep the promise to David. The Moab oracle showed that God would open these promises to Gentiles also. Now, Northern tribes of Israel have been linked with Syria to show that God's dealings with all nations are just and that sin anywhere will not be overlooked (observed by Motyer).

Prayer

Father, your Son has taught us by his words and in his cross that the meek shall inherit the earth. Show me what it means to have a humble heart, and to be among the meek of the earth. Through the grace of forgiveness and by the presence of your Son, you are my glory and the lifter of my head. Father, forgive us, your holy people, when we have relied on the same things as the world. Let our trust be in you, and may the nations see your glory and be drawn to worship with all your faithful people, for the sake of Christ. Amen.

Chapters 19–21

God had saved Israel from Egypt and ruined their land. Now, some 500 years later, they were still proud of their wisdom. But this wisdom could not tell them what God was about (19:12; cf. I Cor. 1:21). He would take away their spirit, their unity and their wisdom, and they would become terrorised by Judah. But this would be so that true worship could be established in Egypt. They, and Assyria too, two 'super-powers', together with little Judah, would freely worship the one God. This and other prophecies to the nations show that their purpose is not just to prevent arrogance but to lead all humanity into true worship.

But, in the short term, this great Egypt was still under the word of God and Isaiah acted out what he knew would shortly happen to her. Egypt was gathering allies to throw off the power of Assyria. Isaiah hoped that people in Jerusalem who watched and heard him would see how futile it would be to trust in Egypt.

The prophecies from chapters 13 to 20 were solemn but often linked with the hope that God had for these nations. Little of this is present for the next three chapters.

Historical comment

The desert by the sea is Babylon but Isaiah may have had her whole ethos from the early days of Babel in mind (Gen. 11). Then, as in Isaiah's day and now, 'Babylon' has represented the spirit of self trust. Twice during Isaiah's time, Babylon had risen in power and challenged Assyria. (In chapter 39, her commander sent word to King Hezekiah.) She fell to her attackers three times before the fall in 536 BC and it is the middle of these (in 689 BC) that best fits the description here. Isaiah felt this coming fall badly because, from a political point of view, it would have been Babylon that could have marked the end of the Assyrian scourge.

Nations continued to betray their trusts. Elam and Media boasted that they would abolish the groaning caused by Babylon. Isaiah saw no respite in this. Rather, he

reported, to a ravaged Judah, the coming fall of Babylon. Perhaps Isaiah longed for the day when no one would be trying to conquer the world, but it was not to be yet. Another watchmen came to Isaiah from Edom about another conflict, but there was no word for him yet. Another situation involved an Arab tribe seeking shelter from distress and a city being called to receive them. This could not provide security for long however because the whole region was about to fall. Compare Luke 21:9–11, 25–28.

Prayer

Father, your Son told us that there would be distress among nations and that many would be paralysed with fear. You have taught us to seek our welfare in your Son and to patiently await his coming. We long for the day when the whole earth shall know that you are Lord. Keep our hearts steadfast in this hope and sure of your reigning over all things. May your mercy be on those who suffer, and may generosity flow from us who, for the moment, are at rest, for the sake of your Son our Lord. Amen.

Chapters 22–23

Northern tribes were not exempt from judgment if they trusted in foreign alliances. Neither would Jerusalem and the Southern tribes be safe if they relied on themselves. Jerusalem's sin was unpardonable. They had, at a time of threat, looked to their own resources, jubilantly, when God had called them to look to him in repentance.

Two men illustrated the self-confidence of Jerusalem. Shebna had made Jerusalem the place to indulge his own desire for fame, but he would fall. Eliakim would be a faithful man and be a security for many, and he would fall because of the wrongful trust of others in him. The whole Davidic kingship was a witness to God's kingship over Israel, so people should have respected their leaders but put their confidence in God. The kingship also pointed to Christ who would have power to open and shut the kingdom of God (Rev. 3:7–8). In that day, it would not be wrong to trust in a man. We would believe in God, and believe in him also (John 14:1).

Tyre and Sidon were part of the Assyrian empire but had prospered all nations with their Mediterranean sea trade. They thought they were safe but would come back with laden ships to find their ports destroyed. God would not give permanence to any other glory than his own. 'Let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practice steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth' (Jer. 9:24). They would, like Israel later on, suffer for seventy years. Their trade had been 'prostitution', everything for money (cf. Amos 1:9). But afterwards, when they returned to their trade, their profits would serve God (for the rebuilding of the temple, Ezra 3:7). But this would only anticipate the glory of all nations bringing their riches into the kingdom of God and of his Christ (Rev. 21:24–26). So complete will be the work of redemption that everything will serve the worship and glory of God and the needs of his people.

Prayer

Father, grant to me a vision of your glory and your holiness. Your glory was given to Christ so that he could bear our shame. What glory is there other than this? May the truth of 'Christ in me' keep my heart from all vanity. Surely Lord, we bring much shame to you and trouble upon ourselves by our slowness to learn that you alone are exalted. But you have redeemed us, faithful God. Let us live to your glory and for the glory of your dear Son. Amen.