

The Road to Jesus: The Gospel According to Isaiah
Oracles of Woe - Part 1 - Isaiah 28 - 30
November 11, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

It is important at this point to be reminded of the history, the historical events that are going on at this time in the life of Isaiah and his fellow Jews. Life in the ANE changed dramatically when Tiglath-pileser III became king in 745-727 B. C. Assyria really became dominant in 729 B. C. when they defeated Babylon. Within a decade, from Nineveh, Tiglath-pileser III was extending his empire west and had absorbed Tyre, Damascus, and the northern nation of Israel. The last few kings were paying tribute to Tiglath-pileser for several years.

As we have already noted, there was an anti-Assyrian alliance that had formed between King Rezin of Damascus, Syria and King Pekah of Samaria, Israel. These two joined forces to force King Ahaz of Judah to join their alliance against Assyria. King Ahaz refused but made an alliance with Assyria. This ended the Syro-Ephraimite Alliance when they were defeated by Assyria. However, it put King Ahaz under the domination of Tiglath-pileser of Assyria.

“Tig” died in 727 B. C. and his son, Shalmaneser V became king and crushed an uprising in Babylon. In 725 B. C., Shalmaneser came west and besieged Samaria and overthrew it in 722 B. C. In that same year, Sargon II came to the throne. While Samaria was being besieged, refugees fled south in Judah. So, the whole situation deteriorated under the reign of King Ahaz. When you don't trust God, bad things happen.

King Ahaz died in 715 B. C. and his son, Hezekiah, assumed the throne. We will see that Hezekiah is a better, more godly man, than his father, Ahaz. Perhaps he learned from the example of Ahaz.

In 713-711, King Sargon II came west and defeated the cities of Philistia (20:1). Then, in 703-701, King Sennacherib came against Judah, two years after he assumes the throne. Egypt was trying to regain its own independence as was Babylon to the east of Assyria. At this point, the Israelites were strongly tempted to form an alliance with Egypt against Assyria. That's what we have pictured in the next few chapters, 28-33. Let's just take a look at chapters 28-30:

WOE AGAINST EPHRAIM - 28:1-8:

Isaiah has used the word “woe” twelve times so far and will use it six more times in chapters 28-33. It is a call to lament because judgment is coming. The first four, as we'll see, are directed against God's own people, the Israelites.

Here, Isaiah warns Ephraim - the largest tribe in the northern nation of Israel, and therefore, a designation for northern Israel itself. They are pictured as drunkards, overcome with wine. That might be their problem; it might also be a figure of speech suggesting that the people are intoxicated with their own wisdom, their own pride, that will lead them to trust someone else besides God.

The Lord has a “strong and mighty agent” (vs 2) who will come like a storm of hail, a tempest of destruction. All the beauty in which Israel had gloated and gloried will be destroyed - like a fig plucked from the tree, swallowed before you can blink twice. Figs appeared in June, the harvest in September or October. They were large and sweet.

In the place of the fading glory of Israel's misplaced trust, God will be the crown of glory, a beautiful crown, a diadem, glorious in the eyes of the *remnant* of God's people. He will rule

with justice (28:6) and be a source of strength for Israel. "In every age there is a remnant which is a part of that great final one. They are characterized by the ability to see through the tinsel of life, beyond the trappings of appearances, to those truths which are eternal, which will prevail" (Oswalt, 508).

The wicked Jews, drunk on their deceitful religion, will have only vomit to eat, in contrast to the banquet that awaits those who will be faithful to the God of heaven (25:6). Smith comments: "Nevertheless, some people are so blind that they do not realize that the nutritional value of the 'spiritual food' they are fed is not much better than vomit" (480). "These who should lead the nation in commitment to God's ways wallow in their own filth and think it amusing" (Oswalt, 511).

JUDGMENT AGAINST JERUSALEM'S LEADERS - 28:9-29:

IMMATURE PEOPLE DO NOT LISTEN - 28:9-13:

It has been clear from very early that a fundamental problem of the Israelites is that they *weren't listening to God's laws and commandments, statutes and judgments*. So, here, Isaiah asks, "To whom will God share knowledge?" (vs 9). To those just weaned? To those recently taken from the breast? Well, God's word to them turns out to be: "Order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there" (vs 10, 13).

These verses may be one of two things: It might be a reference to God breaking down His message into such simply - A, B, C's - that even the weaned baby can understand it. Or, it might be, and is more likely, that to the *spiritually* immature people of Israel, that's all God's message sounds like: "A, B, C, D, E, F, G..." Some (Beyer, 122) have suggested that verse 10 is written as a nursery rhyme. Here is the text in the Hebrew: "tsav letsav tsar letsav. qav leqav qav leqav. ze'er sham ze'er sham." "The people's spiritual depth of understanding had become pitifully shallow and immature." "His laws are like little petty annoyances, one command after another, or one joined to another, coming constantly" (Young, 276).

You see, in verses 11-12, they do not seem to *understand* what God is saying - He is like someone speaking with "stammering lips" or a "foreign tongue." Incidentally, Paul uses verse 11 for a similar point he makes in 1 Corinthians 14:21. God offered them rest but "they would not listen." Because they would *not* listen to God, they would be taken into captivity by a nation who *really would* speak with a "stammering lip" and a "foreign tongue."

"To reject the word of God is not to escape it" (Motyer, 210). "Incompetence and pride lead to bad decisions and a garbled message, for those who do not truly listen to God are doomed to fail God and his people" (Smith, 483).

THE LORD REBUILDS HIS WAY - 28:14-22:

Isaiah is going to rebuke the leaders in this paragraph. First, he calls on the "scoffers" - those who "rule this people" - to "hear" the Word of the Lord (vs 14).

They claim they have made a covenant with death - that they will not die or be punished in the way that Isaiah has claimed. The "overwhelming scourge will not reach us" (vs 15). They made "falsehood" their refuge and concealed themselves with "deception." Keep in mind that "falsehood" and "deception" are *Isaiah's* words, not theirs. He is simply saying that's the end result of what they have been trusting. "What they thought would bring life and hope in their military crisis, the prophet interpreted as a source of death" (Smith, 486).

Eventually (vs 16), God is going to bring Someone - a stone, a stone tested by God, but a costly stone, a costly cornerstone for His new spiritual city of Jerusalem. God will firmly place this cornerstone; it will not be moved by dishonest leaders. He who believes in this stone (You don't "believe" in an inanimate object. Thus, the Stone is a Person.) will not be disturbed.

In Isaiah's context, I believe this "stone" refers to God's promise, perhaps even God's promise to bless the world through Abraham but at least God's promises He has often given that if Israel will stay faithful to God, He will stay faithful to them. But, it is also clear that this "stone" is a person for you do not put faith in an inanimate object. You should recognize this verse being applied to Jesus by Paul (Romans 9:33) and Peter (1 Peter 2:6). A further idea utilizing this imagery is used by Paul in Ephesians 2:19-20.

This Stone will bring into His kingdom - which is also now portrayed as a *city* - "righteousness" (68x) and "justice (26x)." The refuge of lies (vs 17) will be swept away. God will cancel their covenant of death. They will be trampled (vs 18). When the scourge passes through the land, "it will be sheer terror to understand what it means" (vs 19).

Verse 20 says there will be no place to hide; no place to find comfort; no place for rest.

The Lord will rise up to fulfill His task; to accomplish His work (vs 21). Nothing is going to stop God from fulfilling the plans He has set out, not even unfaithful Israel. So, in verse 22, Isaiah warns Israel not to carry on as scoffers lest God make their fetters even stronger. "Decisive destruction on all the earth" has been proclaimed by God (vs 22).

The only way to flee from God's wrath is to flee to His mercy.

THE PARABLE OF THE FARMER - 28:23-29:

Before Isaiah gives another parable, he calls on Israel to "give ear," to "hear" (twice; obey), and to "listen."

A farmer knows how to plant various crops - dill and cumin. He knows what to do for one as opposed to what to do with the other. One also knows how to make wheat into bread and that you do not thresh indefinitely. So it is with God (vs 29) - God's counsel is wonderful and His wisdom great. God knows how to discipline to the maximum effect. He never goes over and He never stops too short. Everything He does is good and perfect. "God teaches people wisdom so that they can do the right thing" (Smith, 493).

WOE AGAINST JERUSALEM - 29:1-16:

GOD'S SIEGE OF JERUSALEM - 29:1-8:

In verse 1, God calls Jerusalem, "Lion of God" or "Ariel." The designation might refer to Jerusalem as home of the "lion of the tribe of Judah." The word could also mean an "altar, hearth," where sacrifices were offered in the temple. If that is the case, then Jerusalem is pictured as the place of worship to God. But it is clear that God is not pleased with Jerusalem or her worship. It is the city of the great king, David. But observe that this is a "woe." This is a message of judgment. They might observe their "feasts" on schedule, but it was a superficial observance and it would do no good. Worship must be in spirit and in truth.

Ariel will be a city of "distress," "lamenting," and "mourning" (vs 2). Observe what God is going to do to Jerusalem (vs 3). He will humble her. God will always humble the proud, even if they are His own children. No one will be in heaven who has not learned humility. Jerusalem will

be brought so low, she will speak from the dirt (vs 4). God will also punish Jerusalem's enemies (vs 5) but the focus here is still on Jerusalem (vs 6).

When the nations come up against Jerusalem, they will lose the battle. Because God is in control. The enemies' defeat of Jerusalem will be like dreaming you are eating or dreaming you are drinking water but, because it is only a dream, you wake up still hungry and still thirsty (vs 8). The defeat of Jerusalem will not be satisfaction to Assyria.

GOD'S SPIRITUAL JUDGMENT - 29:9-14:

Here is Jerusalem's problem. Again, it is pictured as being drunk, but drunk on self-satisfaction, drunk on self-righteousness, drunk on self-dependence - vs 9-10. God has given them a spirit of deep sleep and shut the eyes of the prophets and the seers. They cannot help Jerusalem because Jerusalem does not want to be helped. These may be false prophets who are not giving Judah the Truth or it may be true prophets but God has called them to stop preaching to people who will not listen. "There can be no more frightening motivation to listen to God than this, the thought that if you refuse to hear today, one day you might no longer be able to hear (Acts 28:26-28; Rom. 1:24, 26, 28; Heb. 4:1-11)" (Oswalt, 531).

God's message to a hard-hearted Israel is like a book given to someone who *can* read but refuses or given to someone who *can't* read - vs 11-12. Either way, God's message falls on spiritually deaf ears.

Like so many today, people worship God with their mouths, with their lips, with their "lip service," but their hearts do not belong to God - vs 13 (Jesus quotes this verse in Matthew 15:9 and applies it to the Jews of His day.). Their worship consists of pointless repetition. "*worship* is not worship (Mark 7:6-8) unless it is based on and responds to what God has revealed" (Motyer, 215). So, God promises that He will deal with them "wondrously" and "marvelously." Compared to the wisdom and marvel of human beings, the latter will be as nothing (vs 14).

RESTORATION OF ISRAEL - 29:15-24:

But, there is always hope. For the individual, the hope lies in repentance. For the group (like a nation or a church), the hope lies in a remnant.

Verse 15 begins with another "woe." Do these people honestly believe they can hide their sin from God? Do they believe that God does *not* see their plans or know their plans?

In the imagery of clay in the potter's hands, verse 16 asks if Israel can argue with her Maker.

But after discipline, blessings come. When you get your life right with God, everything else will fall into place. So, verse 17 pictures that - in a little while, Lebanon will become a fertile field. And the fertile field will be as vast as a forest. Lebanon was known for her cedar wood (2:13) and back in 10:34, Isaiah pictured God destroying the cedars of Lebanon.

When blessings from God come, verse 18 shows that the spiritually deaf will hear, the spiritually blind will see. Verse 19 - the afflicted will rejoice; the need will find joy in the Holy One of Israel. Why? Because God will bring the ruthless to an end and cut off those who do evil (vs 20).

In verse 22, Isaiah reminds Israel of their past by reminding them that God "redeemed" Abraham. This is the first of four times that Isaiah will mention "Father" Abraham. God gave a

promise to Abraham and God would fulfill that promise, even through his grandson, Jacob. There is a lot of history there spanning the centuries in the book of Genesis that is worthy to review if we had time.

When the faithful reflects on God's work, the fulfillment of God's plans and promises, he will sanctify God's name (vs 23). He will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob. He will stand in awe of the God of Israel. Those who have erred in mind will know the truth. And those who have criticized will accept instruction.

WOE AGAINST FOREIGN ALLIANCES - 30:1-31:9:

From the time of Adam and Eve until about 750 B. C. there was not a *world-wide* Empire. There were smaller nation states scattered throughout the ANE. They were only regional players. But with the rise of Assyria in 750 B.C., the smaller states were faced with a choice: form alliances or be consumed by the larger nations. Isaiah 30-31 focus on the problem of relying on someone besides God, in this case Egypt.

PEOPLE MAKE THEIR OWN PLANS - 30:1-5:

These plans being formed by God's children were not God's plans - vs 1. In the process, they are adding sin to sin - the sin of trusting someone else in place of trusting God. Why will someone say, "But my pastor explains it differently," when they can read the biblical text right in front of their eyes. *Do not trust man over what the Bible plainly says.*

At this point in history, Israel was seeking help from Egypt (vs 2). They were trusting in Pharaoh, seeking shelter in Egypt. But that would turn out be their shame and their humiliation (vs 3). That alliance would not bring help or profit but shame and reproach (vs 5). God, in fact, had plainly warned Israel to never return to Egypt again (Deut. 17:16).

PEOPLE SILENCE GOD'S PLANS - 30:6-17:

The help from Egypt is vain and empty (vs 7). Yet, God's people still refuse to listen to Him (vs 9). In fact, the people have become so self-satisfied that they even tell God's prophets and seers to shut up (vs 10). They want to "hear no more" about the Holy One of Israel. What a sad day indeed! "They did not ask that preaching cease; only that it be innocuous, and without the absolutes of truth and morality which derive from the character of God" (Motyer, 221). They were wanting preaching that said, "Except ye repent, after a fashion, and be converted, as it were, ye will, I regret to say, perish, to some extent" (Layton, 58).

So, when you turn your back on God, you are in no position to receive help from God. "To reject the word of the Lord is to make an enemy of the Lord of the word" (Motyer, 221). Their true defense is gone (vs 13). Their wall of defense will be so shattered that they will not find a piece large enough to even scoop water from the well (vs 14).

Judah needs to repent and they will find rest (vs 15). They need quiet trust in the God of heaven for their strength. Yet, verse 17, they still want to trust in military strength (horses) but they will flee when Assyria comes - one thousand will flee from one man. That's not courage. That's not strength. But that's what happens when you trust in man and not God.

THE LORD WILL TEACH HIS PEOPLE - 30:18-22:

Notice verse 18 - the Lord longs to be gracious to them. In the middle of judgment and discipline, God is still love. He is still a God of compassion. How blessed are those who desire a relationship with Him.

God will be a teacher to them (vs 20). We saw back in 2:1-4 that Israel needed to learn the ways of the Lord so they could walk in His paths. Ultimately, verse 22 pictures Israel getting rid of their idols and idol worship.

THE LORD WILL BRING GREAT BLESSING - 30:23-26;

This paragraph shows the blessings God will bring on His people. The first few verses picture these blessings in agricultural terms but Isaiah uses these terms to portray a spiritual message. The blessings are spiritual, the blessings that will be available in the spiritual temple, Jesus Christ and His kingdom. I believe this is true - that the agricultural imagery is a metaphor for spiritual blessings - because of verse 26. This could not be literal. Plus, the "fracture of His people" and the "bruise He has inflicted," are spiritual ideas.

THE LORD WILL DISPLAY THE POWER OF A WARRIOR - 30:27-33:

The wrath of God is here portrayed in terms of the heat of battle, as God is a warrior fighting against sin wherever it may be found (vss 27-28).

Israel will one day sing songs in their festivals and have glad hearts (vs 29) when they go to the mountain of the house of the Lord, to the Rock of Israel.

Another picture of God as warrior is in verse 30. In verse 31, Assyria is terrified at the voice of the Lord. When God punishes Assyria, the blows God will inflict will be to the ears of the remnant like the music of tambourines and lyres. Topheth, mentioned in verse 33, was a place of human sacrifice to the false god, Moloch. That place will be ready to receive the dead when God has finished His discipline.

Next week:
Oracles of Woe Part 2
Isaiah 31-33