

The Promised Land has always been essential to our understanding of God's people, and as I have already explained, the errant people of God continued to live in it despite denying the God who gave it to them. Now, however, in the light of the people's rejection of God, the land itself was suffering! If you read through verses 7 to 9, you gain a picture of a land ravaged by invaders with little left intact except Jerusalem (Zion – 1:8) and a few 'survivors' (1:9).

What was going on, and what was happening? It is highly likely that Isaiah's words (1:7-9) reflect the days around the time of the Assyrian invasion of northern Israel in 721BC. For some years before this, the invaders had entered the land and attacked towns, raising them to the ground to spread fear and trembling amongst the population; and they succeeded. Then, after they invaded the whole of Israel and proceeded almost to the gates of Jerusalem (a story which we will focus on in studying Isaiah 36-39), the Assyrians pillaged the regions of Judah around Jerusalem, in preparation for war against Jerusalem. It was a terrifying time for all who lived in that part of the world at that time. Isaiah, however, saw this as the terrible consequences of the rejection of God by His people; the Promised Land was no longer a safe place to live!

Yet Isaiah's prophetic words never left the people without hope, and although the land had been devastated, Jerusalem stood as a sign of hope that one day, by the grace of God, normal city and country life could be restored (1:8). The Lord would never again bring a destruction like that of the Flood, as He had promised (Gen 9:11). Neither would He bring again a destruction like that of Sodom and Gomorrah (1:9). This promise was a powerful word from the Lord. Tomorrow, we will see more of Isaiah's prophetic vision of God and His people, and it is no easy reading!

Application

It is hard for us to read prophecies like this in the Old Testament because the Christian can say so easily, 'Jesus is our Saviour, and He will keep us safe. These problems do not exist amongst God's people today.' I can assure you, I have heard this said on more than one occasion, and this is the reason why I gave examples during the study of how Isaiah's prophecies might connect with us today. I doubt there is any Christian today who could not put forward a few apt examples of how God's people fall from their high calling and (in the eyes of other Christians and people generally) appear to deny the God in whom they are supposed to believe. It sounds incongruous and impossible, but it happens and it is true; but I will not spend time giving further examples.

The results of the spiritual problems between God and His people are there for all to see. Sick and dying churches exist all over the world, and there are attempts to manage and change the church which have nothing to do with the Gospel, and everything to do with money, politics or power. In the Old Testament, the 'Promised Land' was the place where God's people lived, and today, the place where God's people live is not some part of the earth's surface, but the visible church. In many parts of the world, God brings great blessing through His church, but we cannot deny that in many places it is sick and under extraordinary spiritual attack.

Now, if you can agree with me about this, then please read Isaiah's prophecies again. Isaiah is insistent that God will always have an answer for His people. But from the small evidence of this passage and the considerable evidence of the rest of Isaiah and all Scripture, this answer will come through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Messiah. Resurrection holds endless possibilities!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what you know about Isaiah, and recall any famous quotes from his prophecies which are important to you.
2. In what ways do God's people sin against God today?
3. Does God abandon His people today when they fail to honour and obey Him? How?

Discipleship

As we begin a series of studies of Isaiah, I suggest that you keep a small note book to summarise the main themes of Isaiah's prophecies which you observe each day. This will enable you to pick up any important issues which the Lord can use to help you, either to gain understanding of the text, or to apply the teaching to your own circumstances. I will continue to write suggestions about the consequences of the text for Christian discipleship.

Final Prayer

We hold fast to You, O Lord our God, and join with ancient people of faith to trust in Your love and power. We stand together with Kings, prophets, disciples, and the saints of the Early Church to confirm and declare our faith. May other people see something of You through us and through what we do in our communities of faith. Thank You, Good Lord. AMEN

Prayer

We honour You, Lord God of power and grace. You have the power to do what You want as and when You want, and yet You have chosen to use us to do Your will, and You have chosen to work in the world by means of love and by the power of Your graciousness. May we always recognise You at work in the world and give thanks to You for all You do for our benefit. AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The United Nations

Pray for the organisation of the United Nations. Financially, it depends upon contributions from member nations, but such matters can be highly political, and the location of the headquarters in New York is also controversial. Pray for integrity amongst the staff of the United Nations and for genuine political support of its efforts to assist world peace and security.

Meditation

By Your gracious love, Lord God, You continue to speak to us.

- You are firm when we need to be guided;
- You are gentle when we need to be loved.
- You are direct when we need to hear instructions;
- You are silent when we need to make our decisions.
- You are challenging when we need to be goaded;
- You are encouraging when we need to be affirmed.
- You are heartening when we need to be courageous and act.
- You are cautious when we need to take care of ourselves.
- You are critical when we need to know our mistakes;
- You are accepting when we need to know You care.

By Your gracious love, Lord God, You continue to speak to us.

Bible Study - Isaiah 1:1-9

¹ The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he had concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

² Hear, O heavens; listen, O earth!

The LORD has spoken:

I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.

³ The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.

⁴ Ah, sinful nation, people weighed down with sin, offspring who do evil, corrupt children!

They have forsaken the LORD, they have despised Israel's Holy One; they are utterly estranged!

⁵ Why return to be beaten again? Why continue to rebel?

The whole head is sick, and the whole heart is weak.

⁶ From the sole of the foot to the head, there is no soundness in it, only bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been drained, bound up, or soothed with oil.

⁷ Your country lies waste, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners strip your land; it is deserted, overthrown by strangers.

⁸ And daughter Zion is left like a hut in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city under siege.

⁹ Unless the LORD of hosts had left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

Review

Isaiah lived for many years during the reigns of four kings of Israel (1:1), and by the time he was an older man, he was a prophet of repute and a close confidante of King Hezekiah (1:1 – see chs. 36-39); he prophesied from around 760 BC to 700 BC and perhaps even later. It is also thought that Isaiah may have been a priest, due to his access to the 'Holy place' in the Temple in Jerusalem (6:1-8). He was a remarkable character, who was able to see God at work in the events of his day and

spoke about the future of God's people driven by an extraordinary and special calling, recorded in chapter 6. The book of Isaiah stands out within scripture because although he undoubtedly spoke because of what was happening in his own day, his prophecies reach far beyond his own times. Jesus certainly believed that Isaiah spoke about Him (Luke 4:18), and early Christians quickly saw that Isaiah's prophecies about God's 'suffering servant' (Isaiah 53) helped them understand what Jesus had done for them on the Cross (Romans 8:36 etc).

Our reading today begins the first part of Isaiah's prophecies, and these are similar to the prophecies of Amos, Hosea and Micah. These prophets lived in the eighth century BC and they all addressed the religious and social evils of Israel and Judah in their own day. Amos and Hosea spoke against the people of the Northern kingdom of Israel (capital Samaria), and Micah and Isaiah spoke against the people of the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem. Crucially, Isaiah lived to see what happened when the Northern Kingdom of Israel was invaded and dismantled by the Assyrians in 721BC (2 Kings 17:5-41) in fulfilment of the prophecies of Amos and Hosea, and this terrifying event deeply affected people like Isaiah and many others in Judah and Jerusalem. They perceived that if God's people in the south continued to sin like those in the north, they would fall in a similar way. What then would happen to God's Covenant and His people? What would happen to the Temple, if Jerusalem were to be captured? We will discover the answers to these and many other questions throughout our study of Isaiah

The first recorded prophecies of Isaiah, however, are a stinging attack on God's people for wandering far from the God who had created them and chosen them. The verses we have read today are written in a poetic style rather like the great psalms; but whereas the psalms are poems through which people speak to God, prophecies are poems through which God speaks to His people. To begin with, the first two verses contain God's general complaint against His people; He has made a nation, but they pay him less attention than farm animals do to a farmer (1:2,3)! The heart of God's deep concern is that His own people have 'rebelled' against Him. This is the most serious accusation God can bring against any people, let alone His own people!

The prophecy goes on to explain the nature of the rebellion against God by His people. Firstly, the people are 'weighed down' and 'corrupted' by sin (1:4), but they have also turned away from God and have 'forsaken the Lord' (1:4). The first chapter of Isaiah is a stunning indictment of God's people, which we will need to look at in more detail, but is clear enough from what we plainly read. Nevertheless, there is a hint of sadness and bemusement in the prophet's words, a heartache which Isaiah felt and reflect the heart of God as well. Surely, the people of God were sick (1:5,6). What else could explain their terrible state (1:7-19)? What had gone wrong?

Our passage sets the scene for the entire book of Isaiah's prophecies and the story of his life. It is one of the greatest books of the Bible because the prophecies within it eventually cover the whole range of God's saving and redemptive work. A good understanding of Isaiah is invaluable for understanding the New Testament Gospels, and Jesus quotes Isaiah more than any other prophet in Scripture.

Going Deeper

There are four stanzas to this poetic prophecy: God's concern about His people; verses 2 and 3; God's complaint about His people, verse 4; the sickness of Israel, verses 5 and 6; and the state of the Promised Land, verses 7 to 9. As we look at each of these in turn, we will find out more about what was going on, and reflect upon how these same problems occur today.

Before we start, it is worth noting that King Uzziah was a successful king of Judah who reigned from 787BC to around 740BC (Uzziah is sometimes called 'Azariah'). During the last ten years of Uzziah's life, his son Jotham reigned as regent whilst his father was an old man, but Jotham himself only lived a few years after Uzziah died. Both Uzziah and Jotham were reckoned to be good kings (2 Kings 15:32f.). After Jotham, however, his son Ahaz came to the throne (reigning from 741-722BC), and he did not hold the faith of his people in high regard, resulting in a number of confrontations with Isaiah (see Isaiah 7,8). Judah and Jerusalem were changed however when Ahaz died and his son Hezekiah reigned in his place; he was a good king who closely consulted Isaiah. Isaiah's prophecies mention all these kings and a brief understanding of them all will help us follow his prophecies as they unfold.

God's concerns about His people (1:2,3)

Each of knows what it is like when we first discover that something is wrong. We can be deeply upset and confused about why things have turned out badly. God had raised a people through the descendants of Abraham, delivered them out of Egypt and made them into a nation with a unique experience of His deliverance. He then gradually bound them together as a nation in the

Promised Land under King David, but tragedy struck after the days of Solomon when God's people split in two, between the northern kingdom (called Israel) and the southern kingdom (called Judah). How this must have hurt the Lord! People had followed their own ways rather than that of their Lord and Master. Isaiah opened his prophecy with emphatic words spoken in anguish by the Lord, calling out to all the heavens as witness to his integrity. He had 'reared children', but they had 'rebelled' (1:2). The word rebelled ('pasach') is no casual word; it means intentional, knowing opposition to God, even an intent to do the opposite to His will. It is extraordinary that Isaiah uses this word, but we will find out why he does so in studies to come.

As an illustration of God's amazement at the rebellion of His people, Isaiah was given a simple picture of animals in a farmyard. Even a domestic cow or donkey has a natural instinct to return to the one who provides its food, but Israel, God's children, have become worse than animals. They do not 'know' their Father! The word 'know' here does not mean 'head knowledge'. Rather, it means the intimacy of a proper relationship. It is a tragedy when God's people fail because they do not 'know' their God!

God's complaint about His people (1:4)

Isaiah 1:4 is a stunning verse of Scripture. In despair, God calls out 'Ah'; a word which is almost untranslatable into English, but which is more like 'woe', or a call which sounds a cry of mourning at the death of someone loved. God had lost His people as if they had died, not for want of love on His part, but because the nation was 'sinful', which means quite literally, 'full of sin', or 'full of deeds of wickedness'. God's people had been given the codes of law which told them right and wrong (Exodus 20, Leviticus 19, etc.), and chosen to ignore this; something we can hardly imagine ourselves unless we think (for example) of people today who deny that Jesus rose from the dead and yet insist upon calling themselves Christians! Isaiah's prophecy cries out in anguish against all those He has blessed and yet choose to ignore Him; 'offspring who do evil, corrupt children!' (1:4).

In a rhythmic change to the pattern of the poem, verse four concludes with three short, punchy lines. Each line drives home the incongruity of what had happened over the years; 'they have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged'. Each sentence presents the situation as simply and sharply as possible. The people of Israel had abandoned their Lord and God, then followed this up by purposefully going their own way like headstrong adolescents intent upon doing things their own way. However, these irresponsible youths had no intention of returning to their Father's discipline, and created a tragic division in God's 'family'.

The sickness of Israel

But the amazing state of affairs was just like the example I gave above of people who call themselves Christians whilst denying the central tenets of Christian faith. In Israel and Jerusalem God was still God and He still reigned in Jerusalem; He still had a representative on the throne of King David, and His Covenant with His people was still in force. Moreover, the people still lived in the 'Promised Land' of Canaan, even though they were divided between north and south. God remained where He was, and so did the people, obstinately refusing to do anything other than take all the benefits God had given them whilst persisting in their chosen sins. The chief benefits they enjoyed at the expense of God were possession of the Promised Land and protection from their enemies (as promised in the historic 'Covenant')! That, we might say today, represents the attitude of a people who were 'sick'; and that is how Isaiah described the people (1:5,6).

Verse 5 begins strangely with 'why return to be beaten again'. This is a difficult phrase to understand and translate, but the Hebrew conveys the idea of a slave who has committed a crime and been sent away with nowhere to go; he returns and gets beaten again! Surely the slave is sick; sick from head to toe! What other reason could there be for such stupid behaviour (1:5,6).

In these words of prophecy, Isaiah looked at the people of his day and saw them not as the materialistically wealthy people many of them were, but as spiritually sick and little more than deranged. Isaiah used words for physical beating; sores, bleeding and bruises, for example. However, all of these are spiritual likenesses, and the final lines indicate the therapy required; the soothing balm of oil, or what is later called 'anointing'. It is a bold thing to suggest what comes next, but in my opinion it should be said. By the time we get to the end of Isaiah, we will find that almost every word Isaiah prophesies speaks about how God intended to resolve the problem of His errant people, and I am willing to guess that the hint of 'balm' and anointing in verse 6 is just the beginnings of this powerful theme in Isaiah; it is a very simple hint of the Lord's intention to heal through the 'anointed one', the Messiah.

The state of the Promised Land