

thing, obtaining one's identity through them or dressing to present oneself for sex is another, and this is what the Lord abhors.

Catastrophe – 3:24-4:1

As we have already seen, the last part of this passage talks about the consequences of war. However, it is not certain that the war described is something that the Lord has declared as a punishment. Throughout this passage, the words of Isaiah are descriptive, and not prescriptive. Remember that earlier in chapter 2 Isaiah spoke with conviction that the Lord was not interested in pronouncing war and defeat in battle as an answer to the sins of the people; God was looking for a different way to teach His people that He loved them and had a future for them. However, Isaiah knew full well that war could not be avoided. It is an important distinction for our understanding of Isaiah. What we read in 3:24 to 4:1 is not the judgement of God which is pronounced on the women because of their sins, it is merely the natural consequences of their behaviour. They and their men have flagrantly disregarded the Lord, and the reversal of fortunes described (3:24), the war (3:25,26 and the panic amongst the women (4:1) will be the direct consequence of this; tragic as it is.

The judgement which the Lord stood up to pronounce at the beginning has not yet been given, and it comes in the rest of chapter 4 which we read tomorrow. At the end of our passage today, we are simply left to bemoan the consequences of ungodly behaviour.

Application

The issue of women's clothing and dress may seem to you to be a rather insignificant subject within scripture. However, this passage is fascinating because it asks us to address questions about the appropriateness of how we present ourselves, and it does so in a forceful way. Although the prophecy is directly about women's apparel, I see no reason why we should not extend the argument to the issue of how people present themselves generally. In an age of body piercing and body art, as well as all forms of fashion, and a clothing industry which extorts wealth out of the poverty of some of the world's poorest people, this passage has more to say than merely to damn bracelets or make-up. All of us have a responsibility to manage the wealth God has given us in a godly way, and in the light of this passage, spending it on ourselves beyond our reasonable needs does not seem to me to be a worthy way of doing this. Certainly not by using our wealth to make ourselves sexually attractive to others when we are already married! All of us would do well to take a spiritual reality check on the way we use our money from time to time. We should examine whether what we spend on ourselves is morally justified, either because of the nature of the industries which supply the goods or because of the wider calls on the resources God has given us.

Beyond the issues of clothing, sex and apparel raised in this passage, we are reminded that God is always at hand to judge; that is His nature. People today are often unreceptive to the idea of a God of justice who is always ready to act, but we should not be afraid to explain this truth. We have found our salvation through Jesus, in a way which the people of Isaiah's day had not, but God is still our Judge, and the Christian faith is not a license for us to do what we please. As in this passage, our behaviour counts, and it displays what lies within.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss examples of God's judgement, and talk about how this differs from the natural 'cause and effect' process of sin and its consequences.
2. What manner of dress and fashion is inappropriate for men or women today? How can we know what is right or wrong in matters of fashion?
3. How would your society respond to the threat of war?

Discipleship

After reading this study, what do you feel about the way you present yourself? The only way for us to be secure in matters of dress and fashion is for us to know that we have a secure identity in Christ, and not feel that we have to present ourselves in this way or that in order to be accepted, either at work or at church. It is always helpful to talk to others about how you 'come across' and how you present yourself, and a godly friend can be a very valuable help.

Final Prayer

At the end of a day, when good things have happened and the worst has been overcome, may we rest in the knowledge that You Lord Jesus, have been our guide. Then, in full confidence of Your love and power, lead us into tomorrow with faith and without fear. AMEN

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, Your love is never ending, infinitely expressive, forever undeserved, supremely generous, overwhelmingly joyful, powerfully caring, utterly unselfish, completely satisfying and awesomely true; for You died for me and rose again to give me both new life and Your Holy Spirit. May I never forget these truths of my faith. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Clothes

Pray today for the clothing industry, which is notorious for operating in parts of the world where labour is cheap and can be exploited. Pray that governments will carefully watch and regulate the clothing industry so that it gives its employees a good quality of life wherever they are, throughout the world. Pray that the idea of 'fair trade' might apply to clothes as well as food!

Meditation

Now, let us truly honour God throughout our lives – with conviction.

- Giving thanks for the privilege of knowing Christ – without doubts;
- Offering Him every part of past, present and future – without objection;
- Loving everyone He has chosen to place us with – without question;
- Leaving time, each day, to study His Word – without complaining;
- Supporting the church through good times and ill – without moaning;
- Doing all in our power to assist the poor like Christ – without protest;
- Giving over all our wealth and possessions to Him – without excuses;
- Spending time each day to pray and talk to our Lord – without exception;
- Taking every opportunity to speak openly about Jesus – without hesitation;
- Showing love and care for others as our Lord has told us – without dissent;

And remember; all this should come from the heart – with passion.

Bible Study - Isaiah 3:13-4:1

¹³ The LORD rises to argue His case; standing to judge the peoples.

¹⁴ The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of His people:

It is you who have ruined the vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses.

¹⁵ What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding down the poor? says the Lord GOD of hosts.

¹⁶ The LORD said: Because the daughters of Zion are puffed-up walking with outstretched necks, fluttering their eyes at others, mincing along as they go, tinkling ornaments on their feet!

¹⁷ the Lord will afflict with scabs the heads of the daughters of Zion, and the LORD will uncover their private parts.

¹⁸ In that day the Lord will snatch away their finery; the bangles, the headbands,

and necklaces, ¹⁹ the pendants, the bracelets, and scarves; ²⁰ the headdresses, the bracelets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the charms; ²¹ the signet rings and nose rings; ²² the festal clothing, the wraps, the cloaks, and the handbags; ²³ the mirrors, the fine linen, the turbans, and the veils.

²⁴ So it will be: instead of perfume, a stench; instead of a sash, a rope; instead of coiffure, baldness; instead of rich robes, sackcloth; and instead of beauty, shame.

²⁵ Your men shall fall by the sword and your mighty men in battle.

²⁶ The gates of Zion will lament and mourn; she will sit destitute on the ground.

^{4:1} On that day, seven women will grab one man and say, 'We will provide our own food and clothing; only let us have your name; put an end to our disgrace!'

Review

Yesterday, we discovered that Isaiah prophesied because he was disgusted at the actions of King Ahaz, and he described the affect his leadership had on the people of God. Isaiah was convinced that the Lord God had a plan of salvation that would be revealed through His own people, Israel and Judah (2:1-4); but this could not happen if the King (as the servant of the Lord and the descendant of the great King David) refused to accept the faith of his fathers and worship the one true Lord. The deeds of the king affected every part of Judean society, but in today's passage, we read that Isaiah was shocked to see how quickly the people were led astray from their godly heritage. More specifically, how could the priests, scribes and officials of God's people (3:13-15) so quickly abandon their responsibilities to uphold justice and righteousness, '*crushing my people ... grinding down the poor*' (3:15)?

Then, in a quite astonishing piece of writing, Isaiah prophesied against the wives and daughters of the rich ruling classes remaining in Jerusalem (3:16-24). They had a life of luxury in comparison to the poor people of the land, whose homes and villages were being wrecked by the policies of King Ahaz (see yesterday's study) and they arrogantly paraded their wealth without remorse. Isaiah was a priest in Jerusalem, and it is easy for us to imagine him becoming increasingly upset by what he saw around him; his feelings of anguish being aroused by the sight of women displaying themselves in all their finery, and being flirtatious whilst walking amongst the markets and bazaars of the city, (3:16). It is generally true of human nature that when deep feelings lie just beneath the surface of our consciousness, it does not take much to trigger our emotional responses, and this sight appears to have activated Isaiah's heart to prophesy.

Verses 16 to 23 are an extraordinary denunciation of the excesses and frippery of women's fashion, but we should be careful not to jump to conclusions. It would be unwise to read this prophecy as being a general dismissal of women's fashion, clothing and manner, as if we can lift it out of scripture and impose it upon women today with no further thought. Some have taken this route but by so doing, they miss the point of the prophecy. Clearly, Isaiah was incensed at the sight of these 'painted ladies' of ancient society, but the Hebrew of text here is quite uncertain, and we know very little about the items mentioned here; the text is too vague. The point is that if we get bogged down trying to identify the apparently banned items of fashion accessories, we will not deal with the substance of the text. We must ask a more general question about why Isaiah was so upset with the 'daughters of Jerusalem'.

For Isaiah, the decadence of these women reflected the rottenness of Judean society under King Ahaz, and the fact that they paraded themselves inappropriately within Jerusalem was damning proof of the lack of spiritual leadership and structure within the nation. This is quite clear in the last part of our reading, from 3:24 to 4:1. Isaiah prophesied that the failure of the nation under Ahaz would lead to war and battle (3:25) in which all luxuries would be destroyed (3:24). More than that, the men-folk upon whom the women depended for their wealth and identity would be destroyed (3:25)! Isaiah concluded his prophecy with an awful example of the consequences of this; destitute, the women would accept polygamy rather than the disgrace of widowhood and loss of place in society (4:1)! What a terrible way to learn that their men were more important to them than means of acquiring fine clothes and flirting in the market places!

This is a dire prophecy, but Isaiah had already placed the blame for the state of Jerusalem on its male leaders. Isaiah's prophecy against the excesses of the women should not be used to oppress women, but it remind us that all bear responsibility when God's people go astray.

Going Deeper

As we study this passage, we will see how the prophecy arises from the Lord's judgement of His people (3:13) and the war that Isaiah said would happen as a consequence (3:25,26). There are some powerful warnings in the passage about the behaviour of women and their slavery to fashion, but we will study these as the prophecy presents them; as examples of how godlessness affects the life of women, after their men-folk have abandoned the Lord.

The Lord rises in judgement – 3:13-15

We do need to be reminded that although we are used to reading about judgement in the prophetic literature of the Bible, this is the first formal occasion in Isaiah where the Lord is described as formally rising in judgement against His people. It is always helpful to remember that when we read prophecies, sometimes the Lord is described as talking with or arguing with His people, sometimes He tells them the logical consequences of their actions (according to the Universe He has made) and thirdly, He sometimes has to formally pronounce a judgement, because the sins of the people require Him to take action to stop them. Keeping this distinction in mind will often help you interpret Old Testament prophecy in a way which is closer to the

meaning of the text. In Isaiah, the Lord earlier pleaded with his people to 'argue it out' (1:18), and also predicted the dire consequences of what the people were doing (1:24-31, 2:9-17); now, however, comes the formal judgement. The text describes how the Lord 'rises to argue His case' (3:13) for to take a stance is to assert authority; and He 'enters into judgement' (3:14) not against women, but against 'the elders and princes of His people'.

In this first part of our passage, the accusation against the leaders of the people (King Ahaz and his court) is a summary of what we know so far in Isaiah. The country has been 'ruined' (3:14) by the rich plundering the poor (this summarises 1:7-17), and standing in authority, the Lord makes His direct accusation; 'what do you mean by crushing my people?' Those who read the books of the Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) can have no doubt that the intentions of the founding fathers of the nation of Israel were to pass on to them God's understanding of the equality of all people before Him in terms of basic humanity, ownership of property and especially ownership of the land. In Isaiah's day and under King Ahaz, such ideas had been ditched in favour of government by the elite (in the manner of the day, but not too different from the way that ruling elites operate to this day).

Isaiah perceived all this and was the Lord's vehicle for this prophetic message. The truly fascinating thing about this passage is that against this background, Isaiah must have been triggered to prophesy after observing the trivial pursuits of the glamorous women of the day in Jerusalem. It seemed to him like an example of all that had gone wrong in Jerusalem and Judah. In particular, it was the parading of wealth gained at the expense of the poor (most likely by their husbands). Isaiah sounds very angry in delivering the prophecy which comes next.

Unjust wealth (and the women) – 3:16-23

There is no doubt that the prophecy in this passage is against the women, their behaviour, fashion and dress. The first set of phrases in verse 16 all describe behaviour which is not simply showing off clothes and fashion, but strongly hints at the women's open displaying of their sexuality. 'Daughters of Zion' clearly refers to the upper class women of the city, and yet they are behaving like common prostitutes! The Hebrew word I have translated 'fluttering their eyes' is rendered 'ogling' in some translations, or 'glancing wantonly', for example, and the truth is that it meant some kind of rolling of the eyes in a fetching way but we do not know exactly how the women of the day used their eyes to attract men! Certainly, the 'tinkling ornaments' on their feet were the garb of prostitutes who sought to draw attention to themselves. To put it crudely, Isaiah describes the noble women of Jerusalem behaving like common prostitutes. Each society has its own uncomplimentary way of expressing such behaviour.

The judgement of the Lord is awful. Those who behave in this manner will be afflicted with sores, and they will be exposed (3:17). There is no way round the Hebrew here, it definitely means that the Lord will strip them naked in shame. It is as if the women have behaved like prostitutes, so the Lord will treat them like prostitutes. It is a harrowing image, but one which perhaps needs to be presented, even in our own day.

The prophecy goes on, and in a passage which departs from the usual poetic form of the prophecy (3:18-23). Isaiah crashes through a long list of items of clothes, fashion, jewellery and make up which he saw paraded on the women. It is unwise to take each of the items mentioned and imagine that we know exactly what they are. For example, the last word in the Hebrew of verse 18 is 'moons', but it seems that this means a 'crescent shaped necklace common to the day and mentioned in other writings. Also, the 'bracelets' mentioned in verse 20 were items of jewellery worn probably around the upper arms and what they were like, we do not know. What is clear is that each word in Hebrew is grand and long, the words themselves (as words often do) expressing the grandiosity. However, the point of the list is straightforward. As it says in verse 18; 'in that day, the Lord will snatch [them] away'. They are not what the Lord expects of the women of His people.

But as I explained above, we must not forget that it is perfectly possible for women to dress well, wear jewellery and ornaments appropriately and present themselves as they please. Nothing in this text says they cannot or should not do this. It does suggest that if women do so in wilful ignorance of the injustices by which their wealth has been obtained, then they are culpable before God. The trouble is that much fashion and jewellery requires wealth, and there is too much evidence today of women's dependence on expensive make up, fashion and presentation, including issues of size and eating. Our passage is a warning to women that these things are not the source of their beauty before God or before men. Dressing well is one