

Week-3(June)

Coming and Going of Isaiah

The prophets are divided into two classifications, “major prophets” and “minor prophets”. These designations do not imply that the “major prophets” are superior to the “minor prophets”. These distinctions are based on how much they wrote. As we think of “major” and “minor” prophets, the “major” prophet is Isaiah because his book is the longest of all the prophetic books. Isaiah was from the Jewish nobility. Rabbinical tradition tells us that he was related to King Uzziah and King Joash through his father. Since Isaiah ministered to several kings, his royal heritage was good preparation for the ministry to which God called him.

Some Vital Historical Perspective

While this is a devotional and practical survey of the Bible, there is some historical perspective you must have to understand the messages of the prophets. During the historical period in which the prophets lived, preached, wrote, and had their ministries, (from about 800 to 400 B.C.) there were three great world powers: the Great Assyrian Empire, which conquered the Northern kingdom of Israel; the Babylonian Empire, which conquered and exiled the Southern Kingdom of Israel after they conquered the Assyrian Empire, and the Medes and Persians who conquered Babylon.

Isaiah lived during the time that Assyria was the ruling world power, before Assyria invaded the Northern Kingdom and conquered its capital, Samaria. The ten northern tribes, called “Israel,” were taken into captivity and never heard from again. Much of Isaiah’s preaching was a warning to the Northern Kingdom that the Assyrian invasion was coming as a judgment of God for their sin of idolatry. After the Assyrians invaded the Northern Kingdom, conquered, and exiled the ten northern tribes, the Assyrians turned south and invaded the Southern Kingdom. They conquered forty-six walled cities in Judah. The Assyrian armies reached as far as the gates of Jerusalem and took two hundred thousand people as captives back to Assyria. However, when the Assyrian army got to the gates of Jerusalem, Isaiah had his shining hour as a prophet.

The king of the Southern Kingdom of Judah during that time was Hezekiah, a spiritual man and a great prayer warrior, who wrote ten of the psalms. When the Assyrians reached the gates of Jerusalem, their general shouted insults at the men who were guarding the city, challenging the people of Judah to surrender. While King Hezekiah was in the Temple pleading with God for the lives of His people, Isaiah had a revelation. So the prophet went to the Temple and told Hezekiah that deliverance was going to come because God had heard his prayer. Isaiah told the king that the Assyrian army was going to get a message saying

they were wanted back home. When they arrived in Assyria, the general would be killed.

That night, 185,000 Assyrian soldiers died of a plague in their camp. The next morning when the corpses were discovered, the army left for home. When they arrived back in Assyria, Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled when the general's two sons assassinated him. Humanly speaking, you could say that if it were not for the influence and ministry of Isaiah, the Assyrians would have exiled both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms into extinction.

Isaiah gives us one of the greatest examples in the Bible of the foretelling ministry of a prophet. He predicted the fact that Persia would conquer Babylon and then that Cyrus the Great would give the captives permission to return and rebuild the Temple. He names Cyrus twice and foretells this great event in Hebrew history. Tradition says that the elders of the Jewish captives showed this passage from Isaiah to Cyrus and the miraculous prophecy of Isaiah moved Cyrus to issue his extraordinary decree. He not only granted them permission to return, but he contributed building materials to this rebuilding of the Temple. In a precise fulfillment of Isaiah's foretelling prophecy, when Persia conquered Babylon, the first thing Cyrus the Great did was to issue his decree stating that the Jewish captives could return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. (Isaiah 44:28-45:7; Ezra 1:2-4)

A Great Preacher

Isaiah must have been a magnificent preacher. According to Jesus, John the Baptist was the greatest prophet ever born of woman. (Luke 7:28) However, we are told that when John came preaching in the wilderness, he preached the sermons of Isaiah. (Luke 3:4) Since the "greatest prophet born of woman" preached Isaiah's sermons, that makes Isaiah "the prophet's prophet". Isaiah preached for at least fifty, possibly sixty years.

He lived during the time of five kings in Judah and six kings in Israel. Even though he had a lot to say about what was coming upon the Northern Kingdom from Assyria, his primary ministry and concern was for the Southern Kingdom of Judah. If you want a historical perspective on Isaiah, carefully read the opening verses of his prophecy. The prophetic books often date a prophet by telling us that he lived and ministered during the reigns of certain kings. Some of the kings who reigned during Isaiah's lifetime were good kings and some were wicked. One of the wicked kings was Manasseh, who, tradition tells us, had Isaiah put to death by sawing him in two. Many scholars believe the martyrdom of Isaiah is being described when the faith chapter of the Bible

records the fact that some of the Old Testament heroes of faith were “sawed in two”. (Hebrews 11:37)

Dividing the Book

There is a right way to divide the Book of Isaiah. The first thirty-nine chapters are the message of Isaiah warning the people of God about the invasion and captivity by the Assyrians. The last twenty-seven chapters are a message of healing and comfort. It is almost as if the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah are like “spiritual surgery”, and the last twenty-seven chapters are the healing that follows the “surgery”.

The way these sixty-six chapters of the Book of Isaiah are divided has convinced some to draw parallels between this book of the Bible and the Bible itself. Think of these intriguing similarities: There are sixty-six chapters in the Book of Isaiah; there are sixty-six books in the Bible. Isaiah divides into two sections, with thirty-nine chapters and twenty-seven chapters. The Bible divides into two sections, with the Old Testament having thirty-nine books and the New Testament having twenty-seven books. The first section of Isaiah reads like the Old Testament, with many solemn warnings and a message of chastisement, revealing the true condition of man and the solution man can find in God.

The second section of Isaiah is like a “New Testament,” which offers comfort and hope to the people who have been made aware of their need of a Savior because they read the “Old Testament” section of Isaiah that pointed the way to the Savior. The Old Testament begins with the question, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9) The New Testament begins with the question, “Where is He?” (Matthew 2:2) The two sections of Isaiah make us aware of our need of a Savior and then introduce us to the suffering Servant in chapter fifty-three.

The Call of Isaiah

Two passages from Isaiah help us to get acquainted with the man himself, as well as his ministry and his message. One such passage is chapter six, which is a description of the call, or commission, of Isaiah. It might even be a description of the conversion of Isaiah. In Scripture, all the people of God have a coming to God that is meaningful so that they can have a going for God that is meaningful. The sixth chapter of Isaiah contains a description of the coming experience of Isaiah and his commission to go for God.

As Isaiah experiences his coming to God, he hears the Lord say, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” (8) In response, Isaiah expresses his commitment: “Here am I, Lord, send me!” This pattern is very pronounced in

the Scripture. All the people of God who come to God hear a commission and go for God. God explained to him, "Isaiah, the people are not going to listen to you. Your purpose in going is not that the people might be converted. They have chosen to turn away from Me. But I want you to go anyway, because I want them to hear My message." It is tough enough to be a preacher. Imagine being a preacher for fifty or sixty years and not having anyone respond to your preaching!

Isaiah's commitment to his commission is amazing. He simply asked, "How long will it be until they are ready to listen?" And God essentially replied, "Until they are all dead or carried off as slaves, and their country is absolutely devastated and deserted." (6:11,12) The commitment of Isaiah should be a model for all of us. In fact, the commitment of all these prophets was the greatest sermon they preached. They entered into a contract with God. God told them to go, and they went. As they went, the important thing was that they were faithful to God and did what God commissioned them to do.

Our responsibility is to do what God calls us and commissions us to do. The result of our obedience is God's business. Only God, the Holy Spirit, can produce results. Our responsibility is faithfulness. Fruitfulness is God's responsibility. Our responsibility is to do what God calls us to do.