
Day 187 - July 6

The Divided Kingdom (930-725 BCE)

Isaiah Warns Against Relapse

Readings: *Isaiah 22:1-14; 28:1-29; 29:1-21; 33:1*

Reflections:

- The fact of Israel's continual relapses into sin causes Isaiah to continue to prophecy strong words of warning. As one would expect, after the enthusiasm of this time passes, Israel will one day again fall back into idolatry and evil. Within these warnings we see the prediction of Jerusalem's fall, captivity in a foreign land, a future restoration and judgment against Israel's oppressors. The story of "what doesn't work" will continue until the day when God brings a new king, a Messiah, to change the human heart.
- Isaiah 28 carries some great teachings about religion and how it evokes God's judgment: "For it is: do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule, a little here, a little there." This passage outlines in a simple way the way religion works. Religion is that part of the human heart that believes we can change ourselves and others from the outside in. If we can master our environment and force ourselves and others to do the right things, everything will be perfect. Therefore, religion demands we do and do and do and do to be right with God. To ensure we do and do, we layer up rule on rule on rule on rule. And to ensure the rules are right we micromanage every possible detail of life with a little here and little there. Religion tries to get every minute detail right but at the very same time misses larger and more important requirements of God: humility, grace, mercy and justice. God wants our heart, not our robotic, carefully scripted behavior. He actually doesn't care about the details. He cares about our hearts and how we express his mercy and grace to other broken people.
- Isaiah 29:13 says it this way: "These people come near me with their mouth and honor me with their lips (in other words, it all sounds good in theory) but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men."
- "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed." (Isaiah 28:16) This verse speaks of God doing a new thing that sets a new benchmark for true righteousness. God was going to do something true and right and permanent and unchanging. In this new thing, people could trust and find a lasting security. It is no surprise that the first Christ-followers saw

in this prophecy a perfect description of what God accomplished through Jesus. Jesus was that cornerstone for the new temple, the new community of people whom God would dwell with and within. This cornerstone at the same time became a stumbling stone (skandalon) to those who would refuse to humble themselves and chose instead religion as their way of salvation.

- In Isaiah 28:23-39 we see an explanation on the wisdom of God in his work of judgment and mercy. God does not always deal with people in the identical way. He plows and plants, harvests and threshes. He does this all with “wonderful counsel and magnificent wisdom.” People may ask, “Why does God act one way at one time and then apparently act another way at another time?” Isaiah indicates here that it has to do with the season and what was needed. There was a season of judgment upon Israel but this was for a purpose. There was a season for law but this was for a purpose. All of these led up to the ultimate revelation of the coming of the Messiah who would reveal in fullness the ways of God. But prior to his appearing, according to God’s wisdom and will, Israel experienced the story of “what doesn’t work.” This realization should lead the reader to humbly acknowledge and accept God’s ways and purposes.
- “You counted the buildings in Jerusalem and tore down houses to strengthen the wall... but you did not look to the one who made it, or have regard for the one who planned it long ago.” The human heart is bent towards self-saving rather than humble dependence. Here the people of Jerusalem were looking at everything they had and how they could protect and save themselves. They did not respond to crisis by humbling themselves before God, the one who actually gave them Jerusalem to be a city of refuge and peace.
- Self-saving though does not ultimately create confidence but rather will lead a person to fatalism. “The Lord...called you on that day to weep...wail...put on sackcloth.” These were all signs of repentance and humbling one’s self before God. Instead, the people decided that it was hopeless and so they were just going to party until they died. “But see, there is joy and revelry...’Let us eat and drink...for tomorrow we die!’” This shows how sad a place a person reaches when they refuse to trust in God. The proud human heart does not ultimately seem to desire life or true relationship with God but prefers to have control and to be its own master, even if retaining that control leads to their own death. This is the outcome of Adam and Eve’s first act of rebellion as they sought to “be like God, deciding for themselves what was good and evil.”
- One of the signs of judgment against Israel was God removing the prophets from the people. “The Lord has brought over you a deep sleep: He has sealed your eyes (the prophets); and covered your heads (the seers).” This judgment will ultimately fall on the nation and for 400 years the nation will be without a prophet until the coming of John the Baptist, the last prophet who would introduce the coming Messiah. Having said that, this judgment fell because the people did not want to hear God’s voice. God simply gave

them what they wanted. There was no seeking of God or humbling of themselves before him. Therefore, he finally went silent. (Isaiah 29:9,10)

- In our human independence and pride, we think we somehow are able to do things without consequence. This is because somehow we think God does not know or see what we are doing. In Isaiah 29:14-16, the prophet points out that God sees everything and knows everything. You can't cleverly do something behind his back. Israel simply would not submit but were self-deceived in their attempts of rebellious independence. It's as if we are all like little children trying to steal from our parent's wallet when our parent is right there all the time watching every move we make.
- Yet God is full of mercy. God's final words of Isaiah 29 are those of hope and promise. "In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see." This is not just a promise of a Messiah who can heal the deaf and blind. It is promising that one day all people will be able to hear the voice of God and see his works of truth. This will all be accomplished as God's Spirit changes the human heart from the inside out and makes a way for us to commune with God personally and directly. "Once more the humble will rejoice in the Lord; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel." This new open relationship with God is only for those who are humble and aware of their great need. As Jesus would say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."