

Isaiah the Prophet

Prophecy begins in Genesis, but the section of the Bible called the Prophets begins with Isaiah. The prophets were men raised up by God in a decadent immoral time when neither priest nor king was a worthy channel for God to speak to His people. The uniqueness of the prophets was their accuracy rate. I'm not good at math, but 100% is pretty accurate. Moses said in Deut.18:20-22, "When a prophet speaks in the name of God it will come true, if it does not he is a false prophet."

People call the Psychic hot line, they read horoscopes, they like their fortunes told. Everyone would like to see tomorrow's Wall Street Journal today so they could make stock picks. The truth is man cannot guess the future. I always wonder why none of the supposed psychics has ever won the lottery. Even the weatherman with satellites, radar, and computers is often wrong. The law of compound probability makes it impossible for man to predict the future. Each uncertain fact he adds to the prediction decreases his chance of accuracy. Example---You predict it will rain tomorrow, and only one of two things can happen, it will or it won't. If you add the time the rain will begin you compound the probability. If you predict when the rain will stop, or how much it will rain the odds keep going up. If you keep adding things to the prediction, you compound the probabilities to the point it would be impossible to be accurate. Therefore, only God could do it.

Ask yourself, could Isaiah, a mere man writing about 740-700 B.C., accurately predict that Assyria (the dominant power of the day) would not conquer Jerusalem, but Babylon would? Could he predict Christ's virgin birth, the miracles that Jesus would do, Christ's silence before His accusers, that He would be scourged, die a substitutionary death for our sin, be buried in a rich man's tomb, be worshipped by Gentiles, but be rejected by His own nation, and be executed, but then resurrected? What about Isaiah's predictions of the fate of all the surrounding nations like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Moab, and Israel which all came true?

Isaiah 1-5

Normally we expect stories to be told chronologically, but Isaiah does not start his historical narrative until chapter 7. Chapters 1-5 could be called his State of the Nation message. What was the state of the relationship between Judah and God in 730 B.C.? What was their spiritual standing before God under the rule of King Ahaz? What was the state of their moral/ethical lifestyle in God's eyes? You could say that in chapter 1 all who would read or hear Isaiah are called to act as a jury in a trial before the Great and Holy Judge---The Holy One of Israel. God's case against Israel and Judah is presented to us. Then in Isaiah 5, Judah is called to judge itself through a parable about a vineyard.

In Isaiah 1, God breaks in on men who pride themselves on their religion. In v.2, God calls out to the creation itself to be on Judah's jury, "Listen O heavens and hear O earth.

Sons I have reared up, but they have revolted against Me.” The irony in v.3 is that even dumb animals know their master who provides for them, but Israel does not. Verse 4 charges them with sin, evil, and corruption. They had abandoned the Lord. Through their actions they showed that they despised Him. Verse 5-9 describes a land in rebellion that has already been stricken by God. The image given is a battered and bruised body. The land is desolate, many cities were burned down by invaders, and the crops and herds stolen. In Isaiah’s lifetime, Judah was attacked by Syria, Edom, Philistia, and Assyria. Only by God’s mercy had they not become like Sodom and Gomorrah (totally destroyed). The irony is that even with evidence of God’s judgment all around them, they would not respond.

Religion

It wasn’t that Judah was not religious, they were, but their religion was one of hypocrisy. They were concerned with external ritual, but not a heartfelt devotion to the true God. They made the burnt sacrifices, they gave the offerings, they prayed their canned prayers, and they celebrated their religious festivals, but there was no sincerity behind them. All they really had was religious pretense. What is the appeal of ritual and religion? It gives the feeling of being in control, and being able to gain for oneself the blessings he seeks without ever changing within. It is a way men desire to earn God’s favor and atone for their own sins, but you can’t manipulate God. Someone said a Christian is a person who goes to church on Sunday to get forgiveness for what he did Saturday night, and is going to do again on Monday.

The problem with trying to atone for your own sin is ---that’s Christ’s job. Only Jesus is able to make a sacrifice of infinite value. We normally think that money given, sacrifices made, church attendance, and a plethora of prayers is a good thing. Yet, God wrote through Isaiah to Judah, “I have had enough of your sacrifices...enough of your offerings, don’t bother to trample the courts of the Temple. Don’t bring your worthless money any longer. I hate your religious festivals. I hide My eyes from your prayers, I will not listen.” Their problem was outward observance without inner conviction.

The Solution, Now and in the Future

In ch.1:16-33, Isaiah gives them the good news that if they will clean up their act, God will forgive them and restore peace and prosperity. Nevertheless, in the distant future God will restore Israel, “Zion will be redeemed with justice, and her repentant ones with righteousness.” Historically, God’s relationship with Israel has been a cause-effect relationship. God gave them the law to keep with the primary provision that they would worship Him only as God. When they slid into idolatry, God would discipline them until they repented. Moses predicted that there would be three major historical disciplines from God upon Israel. Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 28:15-35 that if they would not obey the Lord that various disciplines would come upon them in the land, like disease, pestilence, famine, and invading armies that would subjugate them and steal their stuff. This all happened during the time of the Judges and the kings that came after Solomon. The second phase of discipline is described in Deut.28:36-63 as the Lord bringing a nation

against them that would lay siege to their cities, destroy them, and take the sons of Israel into captivity. This happened to the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. when Assyria invaded, and to the southern kingdom in 586-585 B.C. when Babylon invaded. Isaiah was probably prophesying about 730 B.C. when this judgment was imminent. The third phase of judgment is in Deut.28:64-66, which began when Rome destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and the Jews were scattered and mistreated until this day. In spite of all that terrible judgment, Isaiah makes it clear that in the end God will restore His people.

The Vineyard

In the fifth chapter of Isaiah, he uses the imagery of Israel as a vineyard to whom God had given everything it needed and every advantage, yet it produced no good fruit. In Isa.5:1-2, he wrote, "Let me sing for my Beloved (God)...concerning His vineyard." God planted a vineyard in a very fertile location. God dug out all the stones, weeds, and brush like a good land owner should, then He planted the choicest vines. God built a watchtower to guard it and watch over it. In expectation of a good grape crop, He provided a wine vat for it. Naturally, God expected the vineyard to produce good grapes, but amazingly it produced only worthless ones.

In v.3-4, God asks the citizens of Judah to be their own judges, "What more was there for God to do?" God provided every advantage, every blessing, and He had the right to expect them to produce good fruit in turn. In verse 5, God gave a proclamation of judgment. He would tear down the hedges and walls which protect the vineyard, and animals would come in and graze and trample it to destruction.

If you were having trouble connecting the dots, verse 7 explains the parable. The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel. The men of Judah are His delightful plant. God had the rightful expectations of justice, faithfulness, and righteousness; but what He got was injustice, unfaithfulness, greed, and idolatry. Isaiah then predicted judgment through a series of six "woes" pronounced in Isa.5:8-25. Woe to greedy land grabbers, woe to the drunkards, woe to blasphemers, woe to the perverted, woe to the proud, woe to the leaders and judges who take bribes and deal for private gain. Then chapter 5 ends in v.26-30 with God calling a distant nation with its armies to come. In Israel's case it was Assyria, and for Judah it was Babylon.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

Paul wrote about 800 years later that all these things happened as an example, and they were written for our instruction (1 Cor.10:6,11). The context of Paul's commentary about the Old Testament stories is a warning against pride and self indulgence. I believe Paul was saying to the church that we are just as human as the sons of Israel in the O.T. We are subject to the same greed, blasphemy, perversions, and idolatry. Therefore, never let us forget that yet by the grace of God go we also. We have the O.T. to learn how important the grace of God through the atoning work of Jesus on the cross really is. Without God's grace the woes apply to us, and because of God's grace Isaiah and his fellow believers were saved too. CHARLIE TAYLOR