

FIRST ISAIAH

Part Two: Chapters 13-39

I have divided the chapters of First Isaiah into four parts. [See article 38 for my commentary on Parts 1 & 2.]

PART 3: ORACLES AGAINST THE NATIONS (Chapters 13-23)

“I will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their guilt. I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, the insolence of tyrants I will humble.”

(Is 13:11)

With the exception of chapter 22, chapters 13-23 of Isaiah comprise a set of oracles against various pagan nations whom God used to chastise and purify Israel. In general, the message of these chapters is to make clear that God’s sovereignty over human pride and arrogance reaches all nations and not just Israel and Judah. The nations section of this book makes clear that all military and political power is nothing before the wisdom and power of Israel’s God who rules the destinies of nations and their kings and counselors. There can be no judgment of Israel unless God wills it, acting through the agency of foreign nations. The nations section reveals the folly of all political scheming when it takes place independently of trust in the one God of all nations.

Since this section of Isaiah does not have much religious significance, I will not be commenting on the individual chapters. If interested in exploring further the nations section of the book, I refer you to *The Daily Bible Study Series*, Isaiah Vol. I by John Sawyer.

PART 4: THE APOCALYPSE OF ISAIAH (Chapters 24-27)

The term ‘apocalypse’ means unveiling. In these four chapters of Isaiah, the prophet unveils for us God’s plan especially as he works through pain, suffering and devastation to bring about something new and beautiful. These chapters *“provide a future vision, a peek into the end times, when all ruin, destruction and suffering will be put into perspective, and new life will come out of it”*(The Catholic Bible- Personal Study Edition, p.209).

CHAPTER 24: A devastated earth; a remnant saved

“Therefore a curse devours the earth and its inhabitants pay for its guilt....” (v.6)

“From the ends of the earth we hear songs: Splendor to the Just One.” (v.16)

Most of this chapter reads like a lament for a devastated earth and humanity. But the lament is interrupted by a song of triumph by a remnant of faithful followers who sing to the God who brings justice to a rebellious humanity. *“From the ends of the earth, we hear songs: Splendor to the Just One”* (v.16).

CHAPTER 25: The heavenly banquet

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts
will provide for all peoples
A feast of rich food and choice wines,
juicy, rich food and pure, choicewines
On this mountain he will destroy the veil
that veils all peoples,
The web that is woven over all nations;
he will destroy death forever.
The Lord God will wipe away
the tears from all faces;
The reproach of his people he will remove
from the whole earth;
for the Lord has spoken... (25:7-9)*

It is easy to see why these verses from Isaiah 25 are often chosen for a first reading for a funeral Mass. While Christians who believe in a next life read these verses as a description of a heavenly banquet during which death and tears will be wiped away, Judaism, which at that time did not believe in an afterlife, read the verses as a utopian ideal for life on earth, i.e., God will remove all the sorrow and humiliation which the Jewish people suffered during the Exile. The rest of the chapter is an oracle against Moab.

CHAPTER 26: A song of trust

*“Trust in the Lord forever
For the Lord is an eternal rock.”*(v.4)

“O Lord, you mete out peace to us, for it is you who have accomplished all we have done.”(v.12)

This psalm prayer starts out by affirming that God vindicates the life of the righteous poor, and then contrasts the enemies of Israel with God’s faithful people (vv 11-19), the result of God’s goodness to them (v.12).

Isaiah calls God “the rock,” the secure foundation. This divine title stresses that God alone provides refuge, unlike any physical defenses, no matter how strong. Because the people of Isaiah’s day had already seen how often their God had humbled the great and mighty, taking special care the poor, they hope that God will again rescue them in their need.

Verses 16-18 is a lament, Israel crying out to the Lord for mercy.

CHAPTER 27

*On that day, the Lord will punish with his sword
that is cruel, great and strong,
Leviathan the fleeing serpent,
Leviathan the coiled serpent;
he will slay the dragon that is in the sea (v. 1).*

This chapter describes God’s victory over Leviathan, a sea monster, a symbol of the evil forces of the underworld, and for Christians a symbol of Satan. The final verse looks forward to the return of the Jews from exile. Israel’s restoration is conditional on cultic purity, which involves the destruction of altars and places of worship outside Jerusalem.

PART 5: HUMAN SCHEMES AND GOD’S PLAN (Chapters 28-35)

The key issue in chapters 28-35 is whether Judah, and in particular its leaders, will rely on Egypt or on the Lord in the face of a growing threat posed by Assyria. Chapters 30-31, which stand more or less centrally within the unit, are wholly taken up with this issue. “*Woe to you who go down to Egypt for help...*” (31:1).

In his book *The Message of Isaiah*, Barry Webb subdivides and summarizes the contents of these chapters in the following way:

- Chapters 28-29:* The crisis: foolish leaders and false counsel
- Chapters 30-31:* False solution: dependence on Egypt
- Chapters 32-33:* True solution: dependence on God
- Chapter 34:* The ‘desert’ which will result from trusting nations
- Chapter 35:* The ‘garden’ which will result from trusting God

CHAPTERS 28-29: Foolish leaders and false counsel

“Woe to the drunkard of Ephraim.”(v.6)
“Priest and prophet stagger from strong wine.”(v.7)

These two chapters are full of scorn for leaders who are too arrogant and self-indulgent to heed the warnings that God gave them through people like Isaiah.

Chapter 28. In this chapter, the spotlight falls first on the leaders of the northern kingdom (vv1-13) and then on their southern counterparts (vv14-22). The chapter ends with a poem (vv23-29) about a peasant farmer who, in his simplicity, is wiser than the nation’s leaders because he trusts God who teaches him the right way.

Chapter 29. This chapter outlines in general terms the measure which the Lord will have to take to bring the nation and its leaders to their senses. It begins with an announcement of judgment on Jerusalem.

Verses 17-24. These verses reverse the tragedy of the broken relationship by describing a new time of salvation, brought about by God’s initiative. The transformation will be so complete that the deaf shall hear even written words, the blind will see even in darkness, and the previously haughty will find joy in the Holy One of Israel. The locus of God’s renewing power is in the people, enabling them to hear humbly and rejoice in God’s mighty words and deeds.

CHAPTERS 30-31: A false solution: dependence on Egypt

In his introduction to these two chapters, Barry Webb writes:

Chapters 30 and 31 must be read together if their message is to be grasped properly. They both begin by denouncing the alliance with Egypt in the most explicit terms (30:1-5; 31:1-3). In the latter parts of both chapters, however, difference by complementary emphases [is] developed. Chapter 30 focuses on the grace which the Lord longs to show to his people (30:18), while chapter 31 centres on the repentance that [needs] to be forthcoming before that grace can be extended (31:6). In the crisis which subsequently developed, Hezekiah did in fact turn wholeheartedly to the Lord, who saved Jerusalem at the last moment by his gracious intervention (37:1, 14-20, 36). So these two chapters are closely connected in both their

settings and their themes. Like chapters 28-29, they reflect the impassioned preaching of Isaiah in the worsening situation leading up to Sennacherib's invasion of 701.

Chapter 30, then, revolves around the contrasting notions of rebellion and grace. The first keynote is struck in verses 1 and 9 (obstinate children, rebellious people) and the second in verse 18 ("Yet the Lord longs to be gracious...." (ibid pp 126-127)

Chapters 30-31 are well worth reading. Especially note the verses in which Isaiah is pleading with Israel to turn back to him, e.g., "The Lord is waiting to show you favor and he rises to pity you" (v.18). Webb titles 30:19-33 "grace in action." He writes: "The grace that the Lord will show toward his people when they repent is depicted under three images: the Lord as teacher (vv19-22), the Lord as healer (vv 23-26), and the Lord as warrior" (vv 27-33)" (ibid p.129).

CHAPTERS 32-33: The true solution: a godly government

These two chapters are unified by a sustained focus on the theme of righteous government—a government which is grounded ultimately in the presence of the Lord among his people and the recognition by them of his kingship. This theme begins in chapter 32 and ends in chapter 33.

"See a king will reign justly and princes will rule rightly."(32:1)

"Indeed the Lord will be there with us, majestic; yes, the Lord our judge, the Lord our lawgiver, the Lord our King, he it is who will save us." (33:22)

For the most part, Isaiah is looking forward in these chapters to a future, ideal situation – the dawning of a new age. But the context from which he speaks is anything but ideal. King Hezekiah's attempts to appease the king of Assyria have failed and Jerusalem is about to be attacked. It is against this background that Isaiah points out that the nations' only hope is a government grounded in the kingship of God. Isaiah develops his theme in four movements:

- *First movement:* a description of good government and the results that could flow from it (32:1-8).
- *Second movement:* there is no shortcut to this ideal; it can only come through judgment (vv9-17) and the outpouring of God's spirit (vv15-20).

- *Third movement:* summarizes in more specific terms the steps by which the new age will be ushered in: the Lord will rise, destroy the destroyer and then establish his rule (33:1-6).
- *Fourth movement:* fills out this summary by repeating each of its elements, but in a more expansive fashion. Central to the third and fourth movements is the confession that the Lord alone can save (33:2, 22). The new age will not come about by political maneuvering. It will not be a human achievement at all, but a divine gift.

Pause: What often causes us to act in a self-sufficient manner, ignoring our need for God?

CHAPTER 34: Judgment against Edom

"When my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens, lo, it shall come down in judgment upon a people I have doomed."

This oracle begins with a call to judgment against all the nations and moves to the specific case of Edom. Why Edom? As a neighbor of Israel, she represents all the enemies of God's people.

What can we say about the vengeful image of God pointed in this chapter? *The Colledgeville Bible Commentary* states: "The vengeance of the Lord is closely related to the idea of justice. It is a matter of punishing the oppressor and vindicating the oppressed (Deut 32:34-43). Yet, it is no less true that this oracle expresses the frustration and resentment of the Jewish community in the hard times of the postexilic period. The sentiments expressed are less than admirable, but they are certainly an honest expression of human nature. Religious people have often expected their God to satisfy their desire for vengeance. The expectation, however, is seldom fulfilled" (p.424).

CHAPTERS 35: Israel's deliverance from exile

"The desert and the parched land will exult... Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm knees that are weak...Here is your God, he comes with vindication."(vv 1-5)

This chapter is a positive counterpart to chapter 34 by focusing on Israel's liberation. The chapter is very similar to the imagery of Second Isaiah (chs 40-45),

which addresses Israel in exile. The message is one of comfort and hope for all in need of liberation.

PART 6: STORIES FROM THE TIME OF HEZEKIAH (Chapters 36-39)

With the exception of two significant differences, these chapters that conclude First Isaiah are almost identical word for word to 2Kings 18:13-20:19. The two differences in the Isaianic version are (a) Isaiah's account omits the fact that Hezekiah surrendered to the Assyrians (see 2Kings 18:14-16) and (b) the psalm of thanksgiving in chapter 38 does not appear in Kings.

These chapters give the historical context for chapters 1-35 of this book.

The narrative is divided into three episodes:

- Invasion of the Assyrians led by Sennacherib (chs. 36-37)
- Sickness and recovery of Hezekiah (ch. 38)
- Babylonian delegation (ch. 39)

CHAPTERS 36: An arrogant speech concerning the power of the Assyrians

"Has any of the gods of the nations ever rescued his land from the hand of the king of Assyria?... Will the Lord then save Jerusalem?" (vv 18-21)

This chapter consists mainly of a speech by the Assyrian messengers. The punch line comes in the verses quoted above. The messengers are saying that the success of a nation is taken to reflect the power or weakness of its god. In Jewish eyes, the proposed assault on Jerusalem was a direct attack on their God.

CHAPTERS 37: Hezekiah places his trust in God

Hezekiah prays:

"Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria has laid waste all the nations and their lands, and cast their gods into the fire; they destroyed them because they were not gods but the work of human hands, wood and stone. Therefore, O Lord, our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, alone are God." (vv 18-20)

When Hezekiah hears what the Assyrian messengers have said, he is very frightened. Then he does two

things: a) he repents – thereby showing his weakness and need for God; b) he turns to Isaiah. Isaiah tells Hezekiah not to be fearful and thus prophesies that the Assyrians will suddenly return to their homeland, without attacking Jerusalem and then he will be killed.

Verses 15-20 contain the King's prayer which recalls the great formal prayers of David (2 Sam 7) and Solomon (1Kings 8).

In response to Hezekiah's prayer, Isaiah utters a prophecy which can be divided in three parts:

- *Verses 22-29* form a taunt song addressed to the king of Assyria. It begins with a great image: in God's eyes, Jerusalem is like a proud, courageous, young woman dismissing an unwelcome suitor with a scornful toss of her head.
- *Verses 30-32* are words addressed to Hezekiah.
- *Verses 33-35* announce that God will save the city from the Assyrians.

Verses 36 states that the angel of the Lord went into the Assyrian camp and struck down 185,000 soldiers. It is more likely that the Assyrians died due to a plague, but the sacred writer attributes the destruction of the army to God through his angel since God is the ultimate cause of all things. In his commentary on Isaiah, Christopher Seitz says that God saved the city because of Hezekiah's trust in God. Seitz adds that the defeat of the mighty Assyrian army is "*a rare example of what a singular royal obedience and trust can accomplish in the midst of a sinful people. God can save the city and its people on the strength of the king's trust*" (p.124).

CHAPTER 38: Sickness and recovery of Hezekiah

"Go tell Hezekiah, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of your father David: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will heal you....'" (v.5)

Hezekiah's own sickness parallels the deliverance of Jerusalem. Both are in crisis, both are given reprieve. At first, death seems certain for Hezekiah. Then he prays and God saves him, granting him fourteen more years of life.

Verses 10-20 are the text of Hezekiah's beautiful prayer of thanksgiving which we find in the Morning

Prayer from the *Liturgy of the Hours*. The prayer begins with Hezekiah telling us how he felt when he realized that he was dying.

Pause: Have you or a family member been close to death and then recovered?

CHAPTERS 39: A delegation from Babylon

“Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, ‘Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: Behold, the days shall come when all that is in your house, and everything that your fathers have stored up until this day, shall be carried off to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord. Some of your own bodily descendants shall be taken and made servants in the palace of the king of Babylon.’ Hezekiah replied to Isaiah, ‘The word of the Lord which you have spoken is favorable.’ For he thought, ‘There will be peace and security in my lifetime.’” (vv 5-8)

The story of the delegation from Babylon prepares us for the next section of Isaiah: the people of Judah in Babylonian captivity. The fall of Jerusalem is not described in the Book of Isaiah, but it is presupposed in chapters 40-55.

In this story, Hezekiah welcomes delegates from a much larger kingdom and perhaps seeks to impress them by showing them all his treasures. When Isaiah arrives on the scene, he states that in the long term Babylon would prove to be an enemy rather than a friend.

The royal treasure which Hezekiah has perhaps imprudently shown off will later be carried off as plunder and with it the surviving members of the royal family. While Hezekiah must have been shaken up by the words of Isaiah, he is at least glad that “there will be peace and security in his lifetime” (v.8). From the sacred writer’s viewpoint, Jerusalem fell and the people were carried off into exile because of the terrible sins of Hezekiah’s successor Manasseh. Because of his apostasy from the faith of Israel, God decides that Judah will have to be demolished and Babylon will be his instrument.

As we prepare to transition from First Isaiah to Deutero or Second Isaiah, Barry Webb names some hard questions that a devastated people may have asked:

As we come to the end of this crucial central section of the book, then, we are faced with the grim prospect of exile and the hard questions that it would inevitably throw up. Was there any hope of recovery, or was judgment to be God’s final word to Israel? Had the promises to David been cancelled or only put into abeyance? Who was really in control of history, the Lord or the gods of Babylon? Was trust in the God of Israel even possible anymore? Paradoxically, it was precisely in this situation, where all the external supports of Israel’s faith had been destroyed, that she was to learn in a deeper way than ever before what real trust in God was all about. (The Message of Isaiah p.159)