

SESSION SIX

ISAIAH: CONDEMNATION OF THE NATION AND GOD'S PLAN FOR A REMNANT

Isaiah 1–6

I. GOD'S COURTROOM

In chapter one, we are introduced to the solemn call to the Universe to come into the courtroom of God to hear God's charge against the nation Israel. The first literary unit (1:2-20) is expressed as a "covenant lawsuit." God's people are charged with breach of covenant and revolting against the LORD with whom they are in covenant relationship. Yet He is "the Holy One of Israel" (1:4), a title referring to His sovereign authority over Israel and which serves to remind His people of His moral and ethical demands. Selected evidence of covenant unfaithfulness is brought forward in these initial chapters:

- 1) There was no justice in the land (5:7; 10:2; cf. 59:8,14,15).
- 2) Israel's rulers were thieves who accepted bribes (1:23; 5:23).
- 3) Murder was rampant (1:21; 5:27).
- 4) The plundering of the poor, widows, and orphans was a common occurrence (1:23; 3:14,15; 10:2).
- 5) Drunken revelry was common among the people (5:11,12,23).
- 6) Their acts of worship had become empty rituals (1:11-15).
- 7) They participated in pagan worship practices and even occultic acts (1:29; 2:6; cf. 8:19).

Because they have disobeyed the stipulations of the covenant, God must judge them. Though God is slow to anger and long-suffering, He will be true to His principles in Deut 28—30 to bring curses upon the nation for their disobedience (cf. 1:19-20). Failure to turn back to the LORD in response to mild forms of discipline means that God will have to bring firmer measures of discipline. This will culminate in exile from the land itself, as God affirms in Isa 5:13,

"Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge."

II. THE EFFECTING OF JUDGMENT

A reading of the book of Isaiah reveals that the dominant theme is one of judgment. This judgment is not simply upon the LORD's enemies, but upon His covenant people as well. However, annihilation of His enemies is not the ultimate goal. Rather, restoration to Himself is the desired end. Early in the book (e.g., Isa 2:1-4), God sets before us the glory of His world restored to Himself . . . a world that is back under His rule and in submission to Him. Hence, the controlling purpose of Isaiah is to demonstrate that YHWH is judging the entire world in order to restore the world—Israel in particular—to the divine ideal of submission and order under His rule.

The judgment theme of Isaiah includes both near and far fulfillments. Since God's own nation has rebelled against Him, the Assyrian and Babylonian punishments are unavoidable present realities.

However, these present judgments are also merged with more distant judgments that will come about with the Day of the LORD in which the entire world will be judged. Hence, the immediate judgments are typical of the coming worldwide judgment, or they are a progressive fulfillment of the promise of that final judgment. Jack Deere points out, "Before His kingdom can be established on the earth a complete judgment is required in order to purify the earth and its inhabitants for the reign of Yahweh."¹

The question now arises as to what punishment/judgment is appropriate for the nation that has violated their covenant with God. Rather than bringing total judgment upon the nation at this time, God will postpone the culmination of His judgment until the Day of the LORD. This will allow Him to accomplish many other aspects of His plan, not the least of which is the provision for forgiveness by the atoning death of His Servant, the Messiah. However, until God finishes His purifying work in the Day of the LORD, Israel will not be preeminent among the nations of the world (though they were called as God's unique covenant people). These two near judgments, the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, will usher in the "Times of the Gentiles" (cf. Lk 21:24; Rom 11:25). Israel will be kept under Gentile authority until God is ready to deal with them ultimately in the Day of the LORD. Then, He will bring all into judgment, remove all unbelievers and rebels against His authority, and restore Israel to Himself in belief once again. Through this purifying judgment, God will prepare the world and His covenant people for the inauguration of His kingdom, establishing the world in peace and righteousness in submission to Himself.

The process could be summarized this way:

- 1) Israel is guilty of violating her covenant with YHWH, and the various "curses" from God have failed to turn her back to Himself (1:2-7).
- 2) Severe judgment is due, but God will postpone this until the Day of the LORD when He will bring judgment not only upon Israel but upon the whole world.
- 3) Other forms of discipline will be imposed, however, until that climactic time:
 - a) Israel will be disciplined with foreign invasion and exile from the land.
 - b) Israel will not enjoy preeminence, but will be subjected to Gentile nations ("The Times of the Gentiles").
 - c) Israel will be hardened in unbelief, so that throughout most of her history she will be "spiritually blinded" to the working of God and unable to respond in faith.

In spite of God's judgment activity, grace will be manifested:

- 1) God will restore the nation from exile and give them another chance to live faithfully in the land (Isa 40ff.).
- 2) A "remnant" within the nation will be spared the judgment of hardening, so that the LORD will never be without witness (1:9; 6:13).
- 3) During this postponement of judgment, God will use this interval of time to provide an atonement for the sins of the world (Isa 53).
- 4) God's salvation plan can be extended to all the ends of the earth (Isa 45:22).

¹Jack Deere, "A Theology of Isaiah" (Unpublished paper, Dallas Seminary, n.d.), 122.

- 5) Ultimately, God will regather and restore *repentant Israel* to Himself (following the Tribulation), and *believing Israel of all ages* will be blessed in the millennial kingdom (Isa 2:1-4; 11:1ff).

III. THE RELATION OF ISAIAH 6 TO CHAPTERS 1–5

How does chapter six with *the call of Isaiah* relate to the first five chapters? This is a much-debated question. Two general answers have been suggested:

- 1) Chapters 1–5 contain oracles from before Isaiah's vision in chapter 6,
or
- 2) Chapters 1–5 serve as an introduction to the book by gathering selected oracles from different periods (editorially gathered without chronological arrangement).

The important thing is that chapters 1–5 are a fitting prelude to Isaiah's call in chapter six. But this call is not a "personal salvation" call, but a specific and unique call *as a prophet* to harden the nation in unbelief in light of her disobedience.

IV. ISAIAH'S UNIQUE MINISTRY OF HARDENING ISRAEL IN UNBELIEF

Part of Israel's punishment for her covenant unfaithfulness is that God will not allow her to experience her season of ultimate restoration until after the time that He has had the opportunity to impose His universal judgment as *The Day of the LORD*. Since it is national repentance that is the key to Israel's ultimate restoration (cf. Deut 30), God will keep them from believing and turning back to Him. That is, Israel will be "hardened" (i.e., *spiritually blinded*) to keep them from repenting as they should.

This is where Isaiah himself is called into action. The call of Isaiah in chapter six is not simply a call to personal faith or even to a ministry role as a prophet. More so, it is a call to a unique ministry of "hardening" the nation in unbelief (6:9-10). Isaiah is called upon, in the exercise of his prophetic office, to

"render the hearts of this people insensitive . . . lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and repent and be healed" (6:10).

From this point on, the nation (as a whole) will be spiritually dull, incapable of responding in faith to revelation from God.² This "hardening" of the nation was still operative in Christ's day, and is precisely the reason the covenant nation rejected Him when the Lord Jesus presented Himself to them as their Messiah. Notice carefully John 12:37-41! Verse 37 states, "But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him." Then Isa 53:1 is quoted, which had predicted Israel's unresponsiveness to the Servant-Messiah. This is followed in Jn 12:39 with the reason for Israel's failure to respond in faith to the person of Jesus and His ministry: "For this cause they could not believe, for Isaiah says again . . ." Then John quotes Isa 6:10 to substantiate the point: Israel has been under "hardening" since the days of Isaiah the prophet. The issue is not simply that they did not believe, but that they could not believe! This explains their disbelief in response to Jesus.

Just how long does this "hardening" of the nation last? The answer is: throughout the entire period known as "The Times of the Gentiles." Since Israel would not submit to YHWH, He will submit them to the pagan Gentile nations of the world, the very ones to whom Israel was to be a witness for

² For helpful insights on the motif of *hardening*, see Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament." *BibSac* 153:612 (Oct-Dec 1996): 410-34. Chisholm notes that the commands to harden the people were said in sarcasm: ". . . the Lord may as well have commanded Isaiah to harden the people, because his preaching would end up having that effect" (432).

the LORD. In the outworking of Scripture, this will continue until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (concurrent with the Day of the LORD). In fact, though Israel was called to be God's witness to the unbelieving world, God will do a mighty work of bringing multitudes of Gentiles to Himself, while they themselves remain in unbelief. When He has done this to His satisfaction, God will then deal uniquely with Israel to bring them back to Himself.

V. PROVISION OF A BELIEVING REMNANT

Isaiah wanted to know "how long" he was to continue such a preaching ministry to a people hardened of heart (Isa 6:11). The LORD responded that he should continue until the land was attacked and the people had been led away into exile. The initial fulfillment of this is with the Assyrian exile which befell the Northern Kingdom in Isaiah's own day.

The hardening upon the nation, however, did not cease at that point. The hardening continued beyond the exile of Isaiah's day. That is, God would not lift this hardening until His judgment had been fully executed upon the land. Ultimately, this is not complete until the eschatological "time of Jacob's distress," i.e., the Great Tribulation (cf. Jer 30:7; Dan 12:1).

Nevertheless, God is very gracious and therefore provides a measure of grace to the nation. Although the nation as a whole is going to be placed under "hardening" and "unbelief," God is going to preserve for Himself through every generation a believing "remnant." The "holy seed" being left in the stump (Isa 6:13) is a reference to this remnant. Within ethnic Israel, there will be "believing" Israel. There would be a historical remnant in Isaiah's day that escaped the devastation (primarily in Jerusalem), but they would foreshadow a future remnant that would return to the land from exile (Isa 10:21; 11:11,16). Thus, the "hardening" is really only partial. The nation as a whole will be kept in unbelief, but God will provide that a minority in the nation will come to faith and have eyes to see! Isaiah and his associates are the believing remnant at that time. Throughout history, those true godly Israelites (like Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah) also continue the remnant line. In Christ's day, the disciples that followed Him were part of this remnant within Israel. In the context of the Kingdom parables (Matt 13), the Lord Jesus said to His followers (having just quoted from Isa 6), "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear" (Matt 13:16).

The Apostle Paul saw the believing Jews of his day as a remnant. Paul takes up this remnant doctrine in Romans 9—11. He says in Rom 9:6, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed, for they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." That is, God is not working out His promises with those who are simply physical Israelites. It is those within the nation who are also "of faith." He goes on to say in Rom 11:5-8,

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened."

Then he quotes from Isa 29:10 to support this reasoning:

"God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day."

Thus, Paul speaks of a "partial hardening" that is upon the nation during this period of the Gentiles. It is "partial," because not all Israelites are hardened. They are always a minority, but through the centuries God has always spared a few from "hardening." To the glory of God, there have been many great Christians who were of Jewish birth! In Rom 11:25, he states,

"For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in."

Not until then will we have "all Israel" saved (i.e., the nation as a whole, not necessarily every single Israelite).

The doctrine of the remnant becomes a very important aspect of the theology of Isaiah. In one sense, it is a continuing line of believing Israelites who survive historic judgments as reflected in Isa 1:9,

"Unless the LORD of hosts had left us a few survivors, we would be like Sodom, we would be like Gomorrah."

At other times, Isaiah focuses on the eschatological remnant (Isa 10:20-23) that survives the ultimate period of punishment. In either case, it is only those who trust YHWH that comprise the "remnant."

A LESSON FOR OUR LIVES

The sacrificial system in the Old Testament was God's design and commanded by Him for the people to carry out. But in Isa 1:11-12, God reveals His disdain for the sacrifices:

"What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" says the LORD. 'I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed cattle. And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts?'"

Actually, God was not sick of sacrifices, but the fact that this had become a meaningless mechanical observation by the people while they lived lives of disobedience. God finds no pleasure in our service to Him if we walk disobediently in doing so. This is a reminder to us today that we must live with a clean conscience. If we sin (and surely we will) we need to confess that to the Lord and deal with it. Otherwise, God is not going to answer our prayers (see Isa 1:15).