

I am convinced of the importance of Isaiah 6-8, which we will study in some detail in the coming days. But in order to understand it, we will find it necessary to have the firm message in our minds that God is prepared to use other nations in order to discipline His people. Of that, there is no doubt.

Application

It is not easy to read a passage of scripture which describes war, and overcome one's natural revulsion at the thought that God is using this means to discipline His people in order to find out some 'message'. However, this goes right to the heart of our understanding of God's Word. Scripture is sacred to us because we believe that God has worked through people to give us these words as His Word, and therefore all of it is important whether we like it or not, and whether we understand it or not. For this reason, it is very important that we are prepared to read such passages and come to terms with them. Certainly, I believe that a passage such as this was appalling to Isaiah when he received it, and it is appalling to us now. But if Isaiah and his disciples (which we will come across later in the book) decided it was important to include in the written book of his prophecies, then there must be something in it for us to discover.

It is important that God's people remember even now that God does use people and nations who do not bear His name to discipline His people. It does not sound very pleasant when put like that, but the principle still stands. If God's people sin and do not do what is right, then God will judge them. For example, if a group of people in a church sin by deceiving the congregation about the use of money or the management of the church property, perhaps by allowing a building to fall into disrepair so that it cannot be said to give glory to God, then there are consequences. People who have used money inappropriately or illegally can be prosecuted (and there are quite a few instances of this which I have heard about in England), and if property is not maintained then there comes a point when it may not meet legal requirements; and a church may be forced to close. In both cases, God has to use the secular nation in which the church is set to discipline His own people for their wrongdoing.

This example avoids the issue of war and destruction, but it remains an important issue for us. God is far bigger than we think, and He is able to do us whatever He will within His creation for His purposes.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group whether you think this text has any value. Would you think a preacher could preach from it?
2. What do you think about the notion that God uses other countries, even 'non-believers' to do His will, including disciplining His people?
3. How can scripture say that God has anything to do with war?

Discipleship

You may not have thought that this rather uninspiring passage would sustain enough interest for a study; but I hope I have made the necessary points to convince you otherwise. Look at the points I have raised carefully. A great deal flows from them. Remember, Jesus was crucified by Romans (pagans) and this is a further example of what we have discussed today. In what ways does the Lord teach you lessons through the natural world or through other non-Christian or 'unsaved' people?

Final Prayer

Thank You, Jesus, for the joy of knowing You and for the joy we have through living our lives according to Your will. Remind us of this when we feel low, and place within us the assurance of knowing that even when our love falters, Yours does not, and we are loved for all eternity. Thank You Lord Jesus: AMEN.

Prayer

Almighty God, You yearn for those who have turned away from You. Help us who are members of the 'Body of Christ' to be careful, lest what we do turns people away from the true Faith, robbing them of knowing You and thus contributing to their estrangement and Your pain. Open our hearts and teach us how to draw people towards You, so that they may have faith and join Your people, the Church. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Burma

Pray today for the ruling military junta. Burma has been led by generals for a long time now, and there is a thirst in the country of democracy. Pray for those who lead the country now, even though they are acting as dictators, and pray for those who are doing what they can to sow the seeds of democracy and change for the good of the people of Burma, within the country and beyond.

Meditation

Let Christ inspire your attitude to the people you meet:

- Greet all you meet with an open heart;
- Listen carefully to what people want to say;
- Give time to little children, as well as adults;
- Talk to young people as if their opinion matters;
- Allow time to let the elderly share their concerns;
- Enjoy conversation with all manner of different people;
- Look beyond appearances before making presumptions;
- Assume the best in people, and look for what is good.
- Be known as one who cares, because of your love;
- Respond with generosity to all appeals for help;

And in so doing, let Christ speak to others, through you.

Bible Study - Isaiah 5:26-30

- ²⁶ *He will lift up a signal
to a nation far away,
and whistle for them
from the ends of the earth;
look, they are coming
swiftly and speedily!*
- ²⁷ *None of them is weary or stumbles,
none slumbers or sleeps,
not a girdle is loose,
not a sandal-thong broken;*
- ²⁸ *their arrows are sharp,
all their bows bent,
their horses' hoofs sound hard like
flint,*
- and their chariot-wheels like the
wind.*
- ²⁹ *Their roaring is like a lion,
like young lions they roar;
they growl and seize the prey,
they carry it off, and no one can
rescue it.*
- ³⁰ *They will roar over it on that day,
like the roaring of the sea.
And if one looks to the land,
Look, only darkness and distress;
and the light is darkened with
clouds.*

Review

Read on its own, this passage is profoundly surprising and disturbing. Is this scripture? What purpose can it have? Isaiah clearly prophesies that God is calling up a nation who

will come and invade Judah and Jerusalem as a consequence of their sins and rejection of their God, but why do we have to have passages like this which seem to dwell on the awfulness of what was happening? We can and will take from this passage some important spiritual pointers to the way God deals with His people, but the reason we have arrived here is no accident. You will know that the passage which comes next is the famous 'call of Isaiah' in chapter 6, and you may feel you cannot wait to get your teeth into an important passage such as this. However, this short dramatic passage stands in our way, and the shocking description of God calling out a nation to fight against His arrogant and self centred people is completely intentional, and important.

The Hebrew poetry shows a high degree of rhetorical skill and drama, so much so that as we read this passage, we can almost see an army coming towards Jerusalem. God has set in motion something which cannot be stopped; His judgement has been delayed, but now it comes swiftly and will not stop (5:26). He has summoned an army ready for war, the soldiers are fresh and fully prepared (2:27), their weapons are primed and ready (2:28), and their victory seems certain, just as a lion closes in on its prey and moves for the kill before removing its quarry (2:29). The lion is victorious and 'roars' over its kill (2:30), a sign of coming victory for the invading army.

Now, if we try and work out what historical event Isaiah was actually describing in this prophecy, then we will find ourselves in difficulty. Many scholars have attempted this task and found themselves involved in ever more complex theories. I suggest we think of this as a terrifying vision, like a nightmare of God's judgement; the kind of vision which would have frightened Isaiah by its power and clarity. Surely Isaiah must have had a revelation like this because people of His day simply did not believe that God would let such a thing happen; yet here, the vision suggests that God has called up the destruction of His own people, the capital and the Temple!

The vision is shattering, and it brings to a climax the profoundly disturbing condemnation of God's people found in the early chapters of Isaiah. We have already seen that Isaiah is convinced God will come in judgement on His people, but He has also prophesied that God would find a way to save His people. Taken as a whole, the first five chapters of Isaiah present a conundrum. God will destroy His people because of sin, but He still loves them and will save them. Isaiah's prophecies have no answers as yet about how this can possibly happen. Isaiah is not the only person in the world who has been bemused by irresolvable puzzles but believes that there must be a way through, even if it cannot yet be discerned!

In the coming chapters we will see the beginning of God's solution and the revelation of His saving plan. Occasionally, we will have to refer back to Isaiah 1-5 in order to make sense of what we read. So what purpose does this short and disturbing passage of scripture have? It is something we have already read and it has probably passed unnoticed; but it will become a major theme in the rest of Isaiah; it is the scandal that God intended to judge His people by using foreign nations. He used pagans to judge His own people! As the rest of Isaiah unfolds, there will be much more for us to discover about this, and surprisingly, it crops up tomorrow in our study of Isaiah 6!

Going Deeper

There is some more we must consider about the scandal of God's judgement, but the details of the passage have few spiritual 'highlights' for us to discuss! Nevertheless, in the rest of the study, we will also examine the overall structure of this part of Isaiah, because the prophecies in Isaiah 5 link with others which come later, and we need to know why this is so in order to get a broad understanding of Isaiah's prophecies.

God's use of foreign powers in judgement

It is not easy for us to appreciate the degree of scandal attached to the idea that God would use foreign powers to do His work in the world, for this was completely contrary to the way that Judean people thought about God. Clearly, this is what is happening in our passage, as God 'whistles up' (5:26) a nation 'from the ends of the earth' to bring

judgement on His people for their sins. The idea has been there all the way through Isaiah's prophecies about judgement on Israel, but here it is placed before us very starkly. Surely, a Judean might say, God made His own people so that He could use them to do His will in the world. Before the time of Isaiah, there is little reference in scripture to the notion that God is involved with the affairs of nations throughout the world and can use them according to his purpose, an idea with which we are more familiar today, so this is an important part of Isaiah's prophecy.

However, God's people had become completely insular, and had forgotten the basic nature of their God who was Creator of all and Lord of all the earth. Although God chose His people and had a special role for them in His plans, He was still able and willing to use nations according to His will. Since the events of the Exodus through which God acted to create a nation out of His people under the leadership of Moses, the story of scripture has largely been about Israel and Judah alone. The prophecy of Isaiah heralds a new phase of God's work and revelation, in which the story of salvation involves other nations; for example, Jonah was sent to Nineveh in Assyria to preach (Jonah 1f.); the Babylonian captives (led by Daniel?) kept the faith during a time of exile and persecution for God's people, rather than the people left in Jerusalem (see the books of 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah, Ezra and Nehemiah); and the story of Esther (which takes place in Persia) tells of God's power to protect His people in a world far broader than the 'Promised Land'.

You may feel that all this is stretching a point here because of what otherwise may be a difficult passage! It is indeed a passage for which there is little to say about its details, but what it reveals is important and powerful, and it was placed here for a reason. All this is important for our understanding of what is to come, and this will be proved only by following these studies in coming days.

The placing of this prophecy

Many people who have studied Isaiah over the centuries have commented that they think the passages of Isaiah we read yesterday and today are 'out of place'. By this, they mean that yesterday's passage which contains 6 'woes' should be linked to Isaiah 10:1-4a, which is a prophetic 'woe' which seems to follow on well from the other six. Why would anyone make a connection between these two passages when Isaiah gives many prophecies with the word 'woe' in them (17:12, 18:1, 28:1 etc.)? The reason is partly because the passage we have read today appears also to be connected with Isaiah 9:8-17. If you read this passage you will find that it easily follows on from our passage today, giving a further explanation of why God judged His people as He did. It would in fact help the point I have tried to make above about God using other nations to discipline His people (see 9:11,12)!

We like to think of the prophecies written down in scripture as being chronological in order, but there is plenty of evidence that this was not always so, and the prophecies of some of the great prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah are arranged thematically rather than in a time sequence. Why then would Isaiah or the people responsible for copying down his work 'split' such prophecies in this way? It is possible that they would have done so (remember, perhaps Isaiah did it himself), in order to emphasise the prophecies contained within each section. There are many prophecies in the Old Testament which are presented like this (e.g. Amos 5:1-17 and others) in which similar prophecies are grouped around a central prophecy of significance.

If we follow this line of argument, then the conclusion must be that Isaiah chapters 6 to 8 must have special significance because they are 'contained' within this pair of 'split' prophecies! We could be right, for as we will find out, Isaiah 6-8 is of the greatest importance to our understanding not just of Isaiah and his work, but of God's plan of salvation for the whole world.

Personally, I reckon that there are good reasons for thinking the prophecies are split in this way, but they could also have been received by Isaiah in the order we have them. I am not of the opinion that the argument I have described to you is conclusive. However,