

For many Jewish people (even to this day) the land of Israel was sacred. To God it has always been a place of promise, but one which is subject to the ravages of the world and also the sins of God's own people. The last few verses of our reading describe the devastation of the land which Isaiah prophesied would take place after Ahaz proceeded with his ill-founded and ungodly foreign policy (as above). As in the previous section, there is a strong implication that after the coming of Jesus, God's true 'Immanuel', one of the consequences would be the devastation of the land of Judah. This did indeed take place in AD70 when the Romans came and destroyed Jerusalem, dispersing the Jewish people throughout the known world where most remained until the last century.

Verses 23 to 25 describe a land which was once priceless and inseparably linked to the promises of God for His people. What was precious had to go before the Lord could rebuild His people and bring them salvation. The whole of Isaiah contains prophecies about how this worked out in the lives of people in ancient Judah, but these prophecies hint beyond this to what God would do through Jesus Christ. Because of Isaiah 7:14, we can read all these prophecies in a new light.

Application

It is quite extraordinary that out of Isaiah's frustration and anger at Ahaz, he could prophecy as he did. We might be tempted to read these prophecies about the Egyptians and Assyrians, about the shaming of the people of Judah and the devastation of the land, and accept them as prophecies which came true but fail to see what relevance they might have for today. These prophecies were preserved not simply because they came true when King Ahaz's policies did in fact fail and the land was invaded by Assyria, but because even the people of Isaiah's day could see that they contained important truths, and at the heart of this lay the promise of God to be with His people (7:14).

It certainly remains very true that if God's people place their reliance on the things of the world, whether for finance, property, leadership and management styles and in a host of other ways, then they will come back to bite us and may consume us. Failure to trust in God and God alone, particularly when things get rough, will lead to further failure and to the need to start again with the promises of God. The passage for today is certainly not a glamorous passage for study or preaching, but this is an important message for us and unless we heed it we will find some of its tragedies may come spiritually real for us; even now.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways is God's church tempted by the world to trust in what it has to offer rather than to place its trust exclusively in Christ?
2. Discuss whether the judgement of God is coming upon His people today. In what ways and how?
3. Is land still important to the people of God today? Is the land of Israel still important to the life of the Church today?

Discipleship

We must always be prepared to ask this question of ourselves. Are we fully dependent upon the Lord and trusting in Him for all we do, or have we moved on to the world's agenda and looked to it for help instead of the Lord? There will be consequences which we do not yet see. Prayerfully, each step of the way, each of us must ensure that our Lord is our priority and our strength, and we must turn away from all the ways in which we are tempted by the world. This must be our constant prayer.

Final Prayer

My heart is full of praise and adoration, Lord Jesus. The things which happen in my life are no coincidences, but God inspired direction for this earthly life of mine. Open my eyes to the greater plans You have for my life and my salvation, Great and Holy Lord: AMEN

Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, suffer the foolishness of my decisions, and guide me into higher things. Teach me how to walk beyond the troubles I experience and find all around me the evidence of the One who made me, cares for me and saves me through Your blood. I barely know how to hold this truth, but You, Lord Jesus, hold me; and I praise You! AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Environment

Pray today for young people learning about the environment at school. Pray that they will not dismiss the issue because they are growing up in a world where it is all just a 'part of life' which is taken for granted.

On-going prayers

- Relief work in all areas of natural disaster around the world
- Clinton and Obama as they seek nomination

Meditation

Bring peace into my soul;

Noises all around me have drowned the voice of love,
And now I need Your quiet.

You heal in inner stillness;

By caring thoughtfulness and unconditional love,
You tend me perfectly.

And as I sense Your touch,

The ever patient tending of my open glaring wounds,
I know a spiritual truth:

This yielding of my soul

Brings life-affirming healing, enabling for the future,
Which opens all the doors

And I will ever serve

The One who knows me more than me and all I know,
The One who cures my soul.

Bible Study - Isaiah 7:18-25

¹⁸In that day the LORD will whistle for the fly which is at the sources of the streams of Egypt, and for the bee which is in the land of Assyria, ¹⁹and they will all come and settle in the steep ravines, and in the crevices in the rocks, and on all the thorn bushes, and all the pastures.

²⁰In that day the Lord will shave with a razor that is hired beyond the River Euphrates (that is, with the king of Assyria) the head and the hair between the legs, and it will remove the beard as well.

²¹In that day a man will keep alive a young cow and two goats, ²²and because of the abundance of milk they give, he will eat curds, for all who are left in the land will eat curds and honey.

²³In that day every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels of silver, will become briers and thorns. ²⁴Men will go there with bows and arrows, for the whole land will be briers and thorns. ²⁵And as for all the hills which were once cultivated with hoes, you will not go there for fear of briers and thorns; they will become a place where cattle are let loose and where sheep roam.

Review

You have probably known what it is like to become very upset indeed; it happens to all of us from time to time. Deep emotions can be aroused in us for a number of reasons, but for people who know the Lord God, it can be deeply hurtful to see leaders who should know better turn their backs upon godly advice, and dismiss even the idea of consulting the Lord. This is what had happened to Isaiah when he confronted King Ahaz and challenged him to trust God rather than find a political solution to the threat to Jerusalem posed by the Kings of Israel and Syria (see 7:1-17). Isaiah felt what we might feel if we brought what we sincerely believed to be a word from the Lord to our church leader, and our advice was dismissed without even the courtesy of the promise of prayerful consideration. So Isaiah was extremely upset when he prophesied to Ahaz that if he did not accept God's presence with His people, then God would come as a child; he said 'a young woman will bear a son, and call his name Immanuel.' (God with us)

In the study of the previous verses to our passage (Isaiah 7:10-17) we read this famous prophecy and saw how it arose out of Isaiah's confrontation with King Ahaz, and why the power of the prophecy has enabled it to transcend the time and place it was spoken. Today's prophecies continue to reveal Isaiah's deep frustration and anger with King Ahaz because of his rejection of the Lord; and whilst upset, Isaiah certainly said much more than just the famous prophecy we know from 7:14! The considerable importance of Isaiah 7 and 8 as a whole has unfortunately been eclipsed by this famous passage, but as soon as we look at the rest of the prophecies in these chapters, they say even more to us. Naturally, they reveal a good deal about the Kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem under Ahaz, and they are worth exploring just for the historical insight they give. However, as we look at the four fierce prophecies recorded in our passage today, they also have some spiritual messages to which we can relate today.

There are four prophecies in today's reading, verses 18,19, verse 20, verses 21,22 and verses 23-5. The first prophecy speaks about the Lord using the nations of Assyria and Egypt to do His will, which happens to be the opposite of what King Ahaz wanted of them (as we will see later in the study), the second prophecy speaks in a strange way about how the Lord will use these nations to mock and ridicule the religious practices of the Judeans (again, we will see why later on), the third prophecy is about the abandonment of Judah and Jerusalem with a strange reference to 'curds and honey', and the fourth continues this theme by describing the abandonment of the land.

At first reading, you may not find these easy to understand, let alone inspiring; but each prophecy speaks about what happens when the Lord comes to judge His people. Considering each of these prophecies in turn, He turns world history around, He removes any false religiosity or pretensions to faith, He takes us back to basics to learn again how to live according to His ways, and He destroys the things which we thought were precious to us and our faith, but which have nothing to do with them at all. This is all very important, and these prophecies need to be heard; because what Isaiah was saying was that if God was going to come as a child (7:14), there were going to be consequences, and of that, Isaiah was completely sure.

Going Deeper

You may not see how I have managed to obtain these spiritual conclusions from each of the four prophecies, and this is the subject of the rest of this study. It is important that we make these connections not just so that we have a fuller picture of this chapter and its famous central prophecy about 'Immanuel', but because if we follow both chapters 7 and 8 we will be led into a fuller understanding of the equally famous prophecies of chapters 9 and 11 which are both strongly connected with the birth of Jesus.

A fly and a bee! (7:18,19)

We have already been introduced to the scandalous idea that God was able to use foreign nations and powers to do His will in the world, and even to reprimand or bring judgement on His own people for their sins (5:25-30). Said like this it sounds dour and theoretical; but Isaiah was upset and his emotions were aroused. The picture he gave Ahaz was far more real. The

Lord would 'whistle up' Egypt like a fly and Assyria like a bee to do His will; and they would become a pest throughout Judah; 'in the crevices and in the rocks ...' (7:19). But what does this mean?

If you read through 2 Kings 16 and 17 (as suggested in previous studies) you will be aware that in order to protect Judah and Jerusalem from invasion by Israel and Syria, King Ahaz raided the Temple of its silver and gold, including sacred objects used for worship, to pay protection money to the Emperor of Assyria Tiglath-pileser, and also the King of Egypt. It was in his opinion the only way to protect God's people. How wrong he was! This prophecy of Isaiah (7:18,19) was his outburst to King Ahaz to tell him that his foreign policy would backfire and the very people in whom he put his trust would return to ravage the land! We will have to read through the rest of Isaiah to follow what did indeed happen and why!

This is an example of a theme which grows in the Old Testament and which comes to completion in the New; it is the theme which tells of the complete reversal of values between this world and the Kingdom of God (see Matt 19:30 etc.). Those who live according to the values and judgement of this world are in for a shock when they finally come face to face with the Kingdom!

Shaved! (7:20)

This next prophecy follows on with a similar theme, but with a twist. Within Judah, many of the holiest people lived according to Nazirite vows by not having their hair shaved; it is a practice we see today amongst some strict Jews, and we remember that it was the practice of Samson (Judges 14-16). In this prophecy, Isaiah told King Ahaz that the King of Assyria upon whom he placed all his hopes for rescue from Israel and Syria, would embarrass and shock his own people. The Emperor of Assyria was not interested in the holy men of Israel or Judah; only the money it could raise for his pursuit of power.

The illustration is awful. To remove a man's hair was bad enough, but his pubic hair as well? That was utter disgrace (note that most Bibles are so worried about the well known colloquial Hebrew expression used here for pubic hair or 'hair between the legs' that they refuse to translate the expression for what it really means. Some translations have the incomprehensible phrase 'the hair of the feet!'). Frankly, this prophecy tells us that God will embarrass His people if they place their trust in worldly things; whether powers, nations or whatever. In Isaiah's day, this was far more clear than it is to who us to read it now!

Taken back to basics! (7:21,22)

The picture we are painted by Isaiah in verses 21 and 22 sounds strange to us. Why would someone 'keep alive a young cow and two goats' and live off 'milk ... curds and honey'? This is in fact a picture of subsistence living in the Judean hills, which means that the devastation wrought on Judah by the king of Assyria would lead to the economic ruin of the land. The very people who King Ahaz paid to help Judah would destroy the lifestyle of the people developed over the centuries. You may notice that the expression is similar to what the people anticipated of Canaan when they were travelling from Egypt in the wilderness, to a land flowing with 'milk and honey' and whilst living on the Lord's provision of manna in the desert, the promise of a land which could support them was a great incentive. Now, however, when so much of the land had been developed agriculturally, the notion of a land with 'milk, curds and honey' meant going back to the beginning to live off basics in order to start all over again.

This message is not easy for us to spot, and it is also confusing because of the reference to 'curds and honey' in verse 15. But Isaiah was just reinforcing a point here. He had prophesied the coming of a child from a pregnant young woman, and in the timescale of his own day, he was saying that the land of Judah would be subject to devastation before the child grew. If we take the wider view of this prophecy and think of 7:14 as speaking of Jesus, then what Isaiah prophesied indicated that by the time Jesus had grown and begun his ministry, the people of Judah would be devastated. God would have to begin again to create a new people through His Son, on the basis of the faith He had first revealed to Abraham.

The land destroyed!