

June 23

Isaiah 1, 2, 3, 5

Today our studies are in what may well be the greatest of the Old Testament prophetic books. Isaiah's theme was simple -- don't trust in human beings. Trust in God and in Him alone.

Interestingly, the book of Isaiah has 2 sections - 39 chapters and 27 chapters. Note the Bible is divided into 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament as well! 66 books, 66 chapters of Isaiah. The first section vacillates between judgement for sin and God's mercy... just like the Old Testament. The second section opens with stories of the messiah and ends with the New Heavens and New Earth... just like the new Testament. Coincidence? Hardly. This is why Isaiah has been called the mini-Bible.

The first five chapters serve as a kind of introduction to the whole Book, which has as its basic theme the idea of 'servanthood.' The problem is that Israel has not been acting very much like a servant of God. "The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, My people do not understand" -- that is the complaint of God, who Isaiah calls time and time again 'the Holy One of Israel.'" That name or expression for God is Isaiah's favorite way of referring to God.

Isaiah minces no words and he leaves us in no doubt at all about what does and does not please God. God says, 'I am not impressed by the formalities of worship services that are not the product of hearts and lives that obey my precepts.' Burnt offerings, incense, and festival worship are meaningless things unless there is holiness in the life of the worshipper. The Israelites needed to learn -- and we need to remember -- that merely going through the motions of worship is an abomination to God if our lives do not match our words.

By the middle of chapter 2, the focus is clearly upon the end of time and upon the day of the Lord. As you read Isaiah, watch for the fluctuations between time eras: the present of Isaiah, the prophecies about Jesus (aka the suffering servant), and the end times, often times denoted by the term 'that day'. Verse 17 says: "The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the Lord alone will be exalted in **that day**." Verse 22, in same way, sums up the whole message of Isaiah. It would be well worth memorizing. Isaiah says: "Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?"

Chapters 1-5 set out the problem clearly enough. Israel is proud, arrogant, self-centered and sinful. She is anything but the servant of God. Chapter 1 contained God's denunciation of His people, along with an appeal and a promise.

Israel's condition was described in a not-too-favorable comparison between the people of Israel and the oxen and donkeys who know their masters better than the people of the Covenant know their Master. God's desire, we are told, was for justice and acts of righteousness, as opposed to empty and hypocritical acts of worship. In chapter 2, there was a brief but striking picture of what Israel one day will be, followed by a most discouraging description of what she was in Isaiah's day. Chapters 3-5 continue to paint an unflattering and terrible picture of Judah, the southern kingdom.

Did you notice how addicted to material possessions the people of Judah had become. Uzziah had been king for many years, and for Judah they were prosperous years, as prosperous as any years had been since the glorious days of Solomon. The people of Judah really enjoyed living well. The word picture of the women in chapter 3 was pretty graphic. They were fashion plates -- and when people put that much emphasis upon how they look, they put an equal amount of weight upon how they live -- enjoying all of the luxuries money can buy.

This is worth paying attention to, because there are certain sins that usually travel arm in arm with that kind of affluence -- the same kind of affluence that we enjoy. The first one is absolutely predictable. The people of Judah are charged with 'plundering the poor.' The second is ignoring God, or reducing him to religion. Watch for these themes in Isaiah...and in your life.

Did you notice the "woes" of chapter 5? Read those carefully...or reread them and ask yourself the question "Could this be said about me? About our church? About Omaha? About the United States?" The parallels are striking. Isaiah's exhortations to his nation could be given to us today.

There is a little note of encouragement tucked into the gloom and doom of chapter 3. It says, "Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds." Men and women, God's ways with people haven't changed. The woes still stand -- and they are equally as applicable to our culture as they were to Judah. The promise of divine protection even in the midst of judgment is also still just as valid for us.

The Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5 is an important passage because the image of the vineyard and the owner of the vineyard are foundational to so many other passages. Israel is the vineyard planted by God. He planted it, cared for it, nurtured it and did every thing that could possibly be done to ensure its fruitfulness. But it only yielded rotten fruit.

Jesus told His own Parable of a Vineyard, planted and tended by its owner, who then rented it to some tenant farmers. He sent His messengers to collect the rent and the tenants beat them. Finally he sent his son and they killed him. In

light of Isaiah chapter 5, Jesus' meaning could not have been more clear. The vineyard was Israel and he was the son. Guess who's in trouble?

Even the vineyard parables remind us of hope, as do so many Isaiah moments, though. God says "Come, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow." God is reasonable. He will send a redeemer to pay for your sins. Isaiah is quoted more than any other book in the New Testament because of how clearly it points to a redeemer and our redemption.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Hang on to that truth today, friends.