

July 6

Isaiah 28 & 29, Pieces of Isaiah 22 and 33

Today you read Isaiah 28 and 29. Let me see if I can give you some perspective on these two chapters. The main theme, which Isaiah began to treat all the way back in chapter 7, is still preeminent here: It is foolish in the extreme to trust other nations. The only wise thing to do is to trust the Lord. In chapters 28 and 29, he pulls back from the world scene again, and is looking specifically at Israel and Judah. In chapters 13-27, he looked at particular nations first, and then drew our attention at the end of that section to some general truths. "There the purpose was to show God's lordship over the nations. Here the focus is on Judah's choice to trust him or not." (Oswalt, p. 504)

Through the work of the prophets, God continually called His people to the reality of their responsibility, as true moral agents, to make choices. That is what makes us distinctive as human beings. Animals react out of instinct, but we respond to situations by making choices, and we must always be alert to the fact that we have to be ready to live with the consequences of our choices. That is something that neither the people of Israel, to whom the first part of chapter 28 refers, nor Judah, to whom the second part of chapter 28 nor all of chapter 29 refer, were willing to do

Back in chapter 7, Isaiah was warning Ahaz not to depend upon Assyria. Because this would be Dumb D-U-M-M Dumb. Now, they are looking to Egypt which is similarly stupid.. STOOPIID... The Assyrians, against whom Isaiah had already warned, are knocking on the doors of Samaria and next they will look toward Jerusalem. Egypt was not going to be anything like a reliable ally against Assyria. To Isaiah, the mere thought that anyone might choose to depend on Egypt instead of God was absolutely incredible. In the words of John Oswalt, a commentator on the Book of Isaiah: "It was a course of action which could only be proposed by a cynical, faithless leadership drunk on its own power and privilege and blind to the necessarily destructive results of such a course." (Oswalt, p. 504) "In chapters 28-29, we read about foolish leaders, a multitude of enemies, and the false counsel that something must be done at once, for there is no hope in God." (p. 505) In chapters 30 and 31, we will find the proposed solution, that Egypt is the answer, just trust Egypt. Chapters 32 and 33 will give us the true solution -- the revelation of the king and his presence in their midst (Oswalt, p. 505).

By now I am very sure that you have learned that Ephraim is a synonym for the Northern Kingdom of Israel. You will remember that this came to be after the division of the realm, in the days of Jeroboam I and Rehoboam of Judah. Since the strongest tribe in the north was that of Ephraim, that association was made. The wreath (or the crown -- a wreath being the victor's crown given to the winner of a race or battle), the 'wreath of Ephraim' is the city of Samaria, its capital. When the prophet says that the wreath, the pride of Ephraim's drunken kings, will be trampled and swallowed after the divinely sent hailstorm, he is talking about the capture of Samaria by the king of Assyria.

The response of the people to this message from God through the prophet is one of mocking and ridicule (28:7-15). "Who is he trying to teach? Does he think he is talking to children weaned from their milk, just taken from their mother's breast? He says do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule, a little here, a little there."

It would appear that the word of God to the people in both Israel and Judah seemed to have two basic flaws. It was too directive, and it was too simplistic. And the people reacted violently against both of these apparent flaws. 'Isaiah,' they would have shouted, 'we are not children -- stop telling us what to do. We don't like that. We are big people now and we are quite capable of deciding for ourselves what is good for us. We don't want you to impose your rules on us anymore. And besides, Isaiah, the world we live in is a whole lot more complicated than you prophets seem to understand. It's not a world in which the simple solution like, "Just trust God and it will all work out fine" applies any more. That may have worked for Abraham and Moses, but everything is different now.' And so when the prophet of God spoke, the responses he got were full of cynicism and mockery.

Isaiah's response to them was this bit of resignation and wisdom. 'Okay -- have it your way. If you will not learn from me, then you will learn to hear God speaking to you through the lips of foreigners and strange tongues (i.e. the Assyrian language). You can learn it now -- the easy way -- or experience will become a very harsh taskmaster indeed, an Assyrian taskmaster, but you will learn.'

When Isaiah speaks of how they are toying with the grave, Isaiah is mocking them, saying in effect, 'The covenant you have with Egypt is a covenant with death. By choosing to trust Egypt instead of God, you have, in effect chosen to die. The bottom line is the same: neither the lords of Egypt nor the gods of Canaan can protect the people of Judah. The result will be an overwhelming scourge.'

There were a few references in Isaiah's message against Jerusalem that might need explanation. Verse 21 of chapter 28 contains two of them. It says: "The Lord will rise as he did at Mt. Perazim and rouse himself as He did in the Valley of Gibeon to do his work -- his strange work -- his alien task." Where is Mt. Perazim? Mt. Perazim is where God, with David, routed the Philistines. Gibeon is where Joshua prayed to God and the Sun stood still and hailstones killed the opposing army. Isaiah is reminding people of the power of God to fight for them. This is not kids' stuff, it is history.

But Isaiah says that the Lord is going to rise up again, but this time His work will be "strange" work, His task an alien one. That is because now he will fight not for Israel but against her. That is the strange and alien part.

Crazy thought for you - have you ever thought that God might fight against YOU? If you reject him, run from him, and trust his enemies, he very well might fight against you. This is not a position you ever want to find yourself. So, simply - Trust God above all things.

In chapter 29, the name Ariel is used several times to refer to the city of Jerusalem. It only occurs as a reference specifically to Jerusalem here. In all of the Old Testament, there is some difference of opinion among scholars regarding its meaning. The best explanation I have found notes that the Hebrew word Ariel means "altar-hearth". Jerusalem prided itself on its religious observances. It relied upon them to secure its relationship to God, even when its heart and practices were anything but godly. By calling Jerusalem 'the altar hearth,' and then delivering his warning, Isaiah is underscoring the fact that God is very displeased with Judah.

I hope that you also took note of the fact that once again in chapter 29, a message of denunciation and judgment ends on a very clear and powerful note of hope. When the judgment is past, a remnant will remain and they will honor God. He will bless them. They will "acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob and will stand in awe of the God of Israel." Israel might deny God's plan; Judah might defy His purpose, but in the end -- after judgment -- the plan and the purpose of God will stand for no one can ultimately thwart His purpose.