

The Book of ISAIAH – Chapters 1-39

Catholic Scripture Study

Memory Verse: *Isaiah 9:10*

***"The bricks have fallen,
but we will build with dressed stones;
the sycamores have been cut down,
but we will put cedars in their place."***

The Fall of the Northern Kingdom (Isaiah 9:8-10:4)

I. OVERVIEW

Isaiah 9:8–10:4 has four stanzas, each of which closes with the refrain below:

"Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised."

This passage is a chilling oracle (prophecy) against Israel, the Northern Kingdom.

The lands of Ephraim and Manasseh (the two sons of Jacob's favourite son Joseph), and their capital Samaria, were under constant harrowing attacks by the Assyrians.

But that was only the start of a chain of events that would lead to the utter destruction of the kingdom.

Israel stood in great fear of the powerful, cruel, barbaric Assyrians. But it is not Assyria's anger that Israel needs to fear. It is Yahweh's that must be dealt with.

The four charges God lodges against Israel all have to do with ethical or moral behavior, with the covenant providing the background or standard by which their behavior is judged.

Note: God established a relationship with His people by the covenant on Mount Sinai, indicating how the people should love God and their fellow Israelites.

When the people and their leaders became unfaithful to the covenant, God would call individual prophets to speak His word to them.

- The first charge 9:8-12 is **arrogance**. Instead of humble submission to their covenant Lord, the Israelites attempt to exalt themselves. The result will be humiliation.
- The second charge 9:13-17 is **adulation of great men** instead of turning back to the Lord. Thus, the whole nation will suffer.
- The third charge 9:18-21 is the **lack of brotherly love**. Having forsaken the Lord, the various tribes attack each other in a bloodbath. Civil war breaks out.
- The final charge 10:1-4 describes the **social injustice** that is inescapable in a society where everyone is looking out for himself or herself alone.

These are the reasons the Assyrians are coming. Change these, and history itself will change. But fail to address these, and even if there might no longer be an Assyria on the scene, God will use other means to deal with his people.

Isaiah sees that the root cause of human problems is arrogance, which then leads to the other problems, the end of which is oppression.

Thus, in a brief but powerful way, the prophet reminds his hearers of the kind of human behavior for which we stand condemned before God and as a result of which nations go down to destruction.

II. THE PRIDE OF ISRAEL/EPHRAIM (9:8-12)

A. Arrogant Israel

The sin for Isaiah, the source of all other sin, is the pride which exalts humanity above God and which makes God but a tool for the achievement of our plans and dreams.

So it is for this pride which Ephraim (Israel/Northern Kingdom) and the inhabitants of Samaria are called to account.

After ignoring this final warning the Northern Kingdom will cease to exist within the decade.

Read: Isaiah 9:8-12

***[8] The Lord has sent a word against Jacob,
and it will light upon Israel;***

***[9] and all the people will know,
Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria,
who say in pride and in arrogance of heart:***

***[10] "The bricks have fallen,
but we will build with dressed stones;
the sycamores have been cut down,
but we will put cedars in their place."***

***[11] So the LORD raises adversaries against them,
and stirs up their enemies.***

***[12] The Syrians on the east and the Philistines on the west
devour Israel with open mouth.***

***For all this his anger is not turned away
and his hand is stretched out still.***

B. A Threatening Prophecy (9:8)

The Lord has sent a word against Jacob . . .

Sometimes God's sends plagues; sometimes He sends help; now He sends a word, and this word (a threatening prophecy) was sent against Jacob. Like a thunderbolt, it fell upon Israel.

(Jacob and Israel are two terms designating the Northern Kingdom).

Men are still opposing God's activity, and so He must send his Word; his anger is not abated.

God has sent forth this prophecy, and because it is His Word, He will bring to pass the threat it contained.

C. The Power of God's Word (9:9)

Ephraim and all the inhabitants of Samaria will experience the devastating effects of God's word. Those who thought they could do as they wished will know the truth. They are finite; they are limited and accountable to God – they don't make the rules, that's God's prerogative. As St. Paul says:

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap (Galatians 6:7).

The people of Israel will find out to their utter devastation that there are serious consequences to ignoring or mocking God's laws.

D. Vow of Defiance (9:10)

"The bricks have fallen . . ." probably describes the result of an attack by the Assyrians on Israel in 732 BC.

This first act of warning and judgment is marked by the image of falling, collapsing buildings - ***"The bricks have fallen . . ."*** This, and the rubble that will occupy their space, become the most tangible sign and the most concrete image of the calamity.

After the devastation caused by the Assyrians, the people of Israel ***in pride and in arrogance of heart*** continue to resist God and make a vow to re-build the ruins with better and stronger buildings and trees: “***but we will build with dressed stones . . .***”

- The vow was an act of defiance against God. Instead of heeding the warning from God and repenting, they defy Him.

In effect the nation was saying: “You will not humble us. We will not repent. We will not turn back. Rather, we will continue to depart from Your ways. We will re-build. We will replant. And by our own power and resources, we will come back stronger than before – against You.”

So in place of repentance was pride, and in place of humility, arrogance.

- And now that vow would set the course for national destruction.

E. More Pride: More Defiance (9:11-12)

For all this his anger is not turned away and his hand is stretched out still.

In spite of all these painful warnings, the people still did not repent, and God promises to raise up still more enemies to inflict even more punishment on Israel.

The refrain above draws together the themes of divine anger with human sin and the threat of divine intervention as a form of punishment.

- His hand is stretched out to smite and to destroy.

III. LEADERS WHO MISLEAD (9:13-17)

When God, who is the true source of wisdom and power, is forsaken, the natural response is to turn to human leaders for these qualities. These leaders are praised and fawned over as those who can somehow achieve superhuman things.

- Inevitably they fail, for too much is being asked of them.

They begin to believe the fawning praise lavished on them, and pander more and more to the ever-changing whims of a fickle people.

This is the second charge God brings against the Israelites. In Chapter 3 God says he would deprive Israel and Judah of all such false leaders.

The following passage is a unique attack on the whole of Israelite society. It describes how unrepentant and godless people are punished, whatever their status: young and old, leaders and led, false prophets, even the widow and the orphan.

Once more **“seeking the Lord of Hosts”** is called for. This seeking comprises:

- Listening to his prophet,
- Accepting his interpretation of contemporary history, and
- Admitting that suffering and defeat are deserved.

Read: Isaiah 9:13-17

[13] The people did not turn to him who smote them, nor seek the LORD of hosts.

[14] So the LORD cut off from Israel head and tail, palm branch and reed in one day --

[15] the elder and honored man is the head, and the prophet who teaches lies is the tail;

***[16] for those who lead this people lead them astray,
and those who are led by them are swallowed up.***

***[17] Therefore the Lord does not rejoice over their young men,
and has no compassion on their fatherless and widows;
for every one is godless and an evildoer,
and every mouth speaks folly.***

***For all this his anger is not turned away
and his hand is stretched out still.***

A. Progression of Judgment (9:13-14)

These verses give a general statement of the progression of judgment.

A people who will not respond to the initial judgment which falls upon them, and seek from God both the diagnosis and cure, will shortly find their foolish rulers leading them into a situation where they will have no leadership at all.

B. The Head and the Tail (9:13)

Since the people refuse to turn back to the Lord and repent, He cuts off their heads (the elders and nobles) and their tails (the false prophets).

The head and the tale represent two sources of authority: the elder statesman who, like Ahaz, rejected the word of God and the false prophet who teaches lies.

- Even widows and orphans are godless fools and can expect no compassion.

C. Judgment will Fall Suddenly (9:14)

“In one day . . .” Abruptly, suddenly, the judgment will fall, without time for preparation or time to change their ways. The only

preparation for judgment is to live each day as if this were the day (Matt.24:36-44).

IV. BROTHER AGAINST BROTHER (9:18-21)

The third section (18-21) adds internal strife - ***no man spares his brother*** - to the picture of anarchy and desperation.

Read: Isaiah 9:18-21

***[18] For wickedness burns like a fire,
it consumes briars and thorns;
it kindles the thickets of the forest,
and they roll upward in a column of smoke.***

***[19] Through the wrath of the LORD of hosts
the land is burned,
and the people are like fuel for the fire;
no man spares his brother.***

***[20] They snatch on the right, but are still hungry,
and they devour on the left, but are not satisfied;
each devours his neighbor's flesh,***

***[21] Manasseh Ephraim, and Ephraim Manasseh,
and together they are against Judah.
For all this his anger is not turned away
and his hand is stretched out still.***

A. The Two Fires (9:18-19)

The wickedness of the people is described as a fire out of control and the people are fuel for the fire. Two fires are described here, but they are intimately related.

- One is the consuming fire of sin.
- The other is the fire of God's wrath.

Here Isaiah lays bare the true nature of sin. It is not a little misguided playfulness as it is so often depicted. It is a rebellion against God's order for life.

As such, it can only be destructive, like a grass fire which works its way through the brush at the edge of the forest deceptively slowly but then increases speed until it bursts into the woods with a roar and a rush of smoke.

B. Civil War (9:20-21)

Civil war breaks out – tribe against tribe; brother against brother. Manasseh devours Ephraim and likewise Ephraim devours Manasseh. Both these tribes belong to the Northern Kingdom.

The reference implies a civil war within the kingdom with one tribe warring against another.

As the terrific pressure of Assyria's demand for tribute mounts higher and higher, everyone scrambles to save his or her own neck; if that means robbing your neighbor or even your brother, so be it.

Ultimately, as the final siege begins, the devouring of one's "own offspring" ceases to be metaphorical and becomes a horrible, literal fact (9:20) - ***each devours his neighbor's flesh.***

This section also ends with the refrain:

***For all this his anger is not turned away
and his hand is stretched out still.***

V. SOCIAL INJUSTICE (10:1-4)

The final manifestation of human pride is in oppression.

In a world characterized by human arrogance, adulation of human leaders and mutual destruction by the various elements of society,

justice becomes a rarer and rarer commodity, with the poor and the helpless being least able to obtain it.

This is what it described in the final stanza (10:1-4).

God's particular anger is reserved for those who consciously use the legal system to oppress the poor and make themselves rich (10:1-2). But God says that all those riches will do no good when the enemy comes. They will not be enough "riches" to deliver them from captivity.

Read: Isaiah 10:1-4

***[1] Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees,
and the writers who keep writing oppression,
[2] to turn aside the needy from justice
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
that widows may be their spoil,
and that they may make the fatherless their prey!
[3] What will you do on the day of punishment,
in the storm which will come from afar?
To whom will you flee for help,
and where will you leave your wealth?
[4] Nothing remains but to crouch among the prisoners
or fall among the slain.
For all this his anger is not turned away
and his hand is stretched out still.***

C. Unjust Judicial System (10:1-2)

Verse 2 explains what is meant by those who "***decree iniquitous decrees***" and the "***writers who keep writing oppression***" in verse 1.

Those in positions of authority – judges or administrators of the law - were manipulating the legal system in such a way as to favor their

own interests, particularly in matters of land and property ownership.

In a society where the poor were not represented on the legislative body, their rights had to be protected by the law of the land. If the laws were unjust, then they were at the mercy of the ruling classes.

Isaiah speaks of a woe cast upon these judges or administrators who promulgate unjust decrees, depriving the needy of just judgments.

D. The Day of Punishment (10:3-4)

Verse 3 assumes that a **“day of punishment”** is inevitable, and describes it as a terrible catastrophe. The word translated **“storm”** means much more than any meteorological phenomenon can suggest.

Courageously, Isaiah stands alone before the whole nation and asks the rich and powerful oppressors of the poor three questions:

What will you do on the day of punishment? You who are confident that you can meet every situation, who think that all wisdom resides in man alone! Judgment is coming. It is mighty and gathering force.

What will you do? **To whom will you flee for help? Where will you leave your wealth?**

After all their evil acts, they can ask themselves where can they flee for help at the time of the Assyrian invasion (**the storm which will come from afar**) and to whom will they leave their wealth.

The only One who can give them help is the One who controls the breaking storm of judgment.

All their ill-gotten wealth will be lost as catastrophe sweeps in from far away. The position and power which enabled them to walk on the backs of the poor will be meaningless before God's judgment.

If only the world would listen and heed Isaiah's words today!

“What will you do, you who trust in man? The day of judgment is coming! Flee to Him who alone can save from the wrath to come.”

E. The Fate of the Rich and Powerful

Finally, these great men (and women) who have enriched themselves at the expense of the helpless will suffer the same fate as everyone else at the time of the judgment (Assyrian invasion): huddling among the captives, lying in the heaps of the slain.

- Before the wrath of God, status, power, and wealth mean nothing.

So for all these offenses against God - pride, false leadership, warring against one's brothers, or oppression of the poor - the divine hand is outstretched to strike.

It is not Assyria's overwhelming power which dictates the future of Ephraim and Judah; it is their failure to submit to God and to live in accordance with his principles. It is that failure which will destroy them.

God is with us for good or ill.

We will either live in the glory of that fact or die by smashing ourselves against it. The Assyrias of this world do not hold the balances: God does, and the Assyrias are weighed in the balance with the rest of us.

VI. APPLICATION

A. Pride

The problem of human pride is a perennial one. It is the deepest and most serious of human sins. It is as much a problem for those with low self-esteem as for those with a superiority complex.

That can be seen in the first passage 9:8-12. Israel is in serious trouble. They have lost large areas of their land already. They have experienced significant destruction. But in their concern to look good, they assure themselves, and any who will listen, that they can “come back” better and stronger without God’s help – without repentance.

It is pride that prevents people from a realistic assessment of themselves and a humble turning to God for help, strength, and guidance.

B. Adulation of Leaders

Isaiah 9:13-17 is about the consequences in political and social life when people do not recognize the lordship of God.

They expect the leaders to give them the security and meaning only God can give. Moreover, the leaders believe the adulation that people give them. Thus, the leaders, to maintain their own position and power, say what they think the people want to hear (they lie and mislead) instead of what may be unpopular but necessary for the public good.

C. Lack of Brotherly Love

A further consequence of refusing to acknowledge God is social breakdown as a result of ravaging or unbridled self-interest (9:18-21). As individuals put their own self-interests first, the result is

that they no longer have a concern for the greater good of the people.

As a result, brotherly love is lost or lacking, and Jesus' words on love "*by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,*" are ignored or rejected.

D. Leaders

Unless leaders constantly acknowledge their dependence on God, the tendency to the demonic is present.

The leaders themselves will believe the adulation that fallen humans will heap on them. Then they will begin to believe that they have a right in themselves to positions of power and prominence.

Soon they are governing not for the governed but for themselves. Their actions are tailored as to how best to maintain themselves in power. They are unwilling to take right positions that might be dangerous to their power.

Instead they govern by polls, trying to decide where the people are going and then running to get in front of the crowd. As a result, the leaders "mislead" and those who are "led" are "led astray."

Preparation for Isaiah Week 11

The Arrogance of Assyria

1. Read Isaiah, Chapter 10:5-34
2. Read Chapter 3 in *Come and See Catholic Bible Study – Isaiah*.
3. Answer questions 9-11 in *Come and See* (pgs. 30-31).