

Isaiah – Saying What People Want to Hear • Isaiah 1-66

The United Nations in New York City must be the most political place in the world, but when you enter the General Assembly building there is a quotation on the wall from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah:

“They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”

Most people misunderstand and think that the primary job of a prophet is to predict the future, but that’s really not their primary job. Prophets are politicians, of sorts, although they rarely hold public office. Probably they could never win enough votes or public support. But they are a very important part of a nation’s political process and moral destiny.

Isaiah was not only a great prophet 27 centuries ago, he is still being quoted at the United Nations today. Some say he was the most effective and significant prophet in the entire Bible. The Old Testament book named after him is one of the longest in the Bible with 66 chapters that cover 108 pages. If you don’t understand it, it’s pretty boring; but if you do understand it, it can be a spellbinding page-turner.

Prophets speak for God. Most of what they say deals with the present. Sometimes it predicts the future. What’s important is not the time but the message from God.

Together prophets and politicians have a place in leading a nation. Prophets tend to be purists. They continually call for the ideal. Politicians usually are realists and have to do what will work.

Often they irritate each other. Prophets can be blunt and critical. Politicians want to say, “If you’re so smart, why don’t you run for office and see if you can do better?” It would probably never work because most prophets are better at talking about what needs to be done than man-

aging the change.

Prophets often say things that people don’t want to hear. For example, in Isaiah 3:16-26 we can read what Isaiah had to say to the women of the city of Jerusalem:

The Lord says,

“The women of Zion are haughty, walking along with outstretched necks, flirting with their eyes, tripping along with mincing steps, with ornaments jingling on their ankles. Therefore the Lord will bring sores on the heads of the women of Zion; the Lord will make their scalps bald.”

“*And vote for me . . . my name is Isaiah!*”

Isaiah was a prophet for 54 years, a record length of time. He was the public spokesman for God during the reigns of five kings of the southern kingdom of Israel with its capital in Jerusalem.

Uzziah was king from 791 to 739 BC. He was 16 years old when he began his reign and he ruled in Jerusalem for 52 years. It was during his reign that Isaiah became a public prophet. He was a pretty good king. He sought the Lord and was blessed with great military strength. He had a powerful army with 307,500 trained soldiers. He developed powerful fighting machines and built large towers to protect Jerusalem. So there was peace.

With peace came economic prosperity. And with prosperity came pride, arrogance and self-reliance. The wealthy upper class women wore expensive clothes and jewelry and their husbands oppressed the poor. Toward the end

of his reign Uzziah, too, became arrogant. He illegally walked into the temple to offer incense to God. The priests confronted him and God struck him with leprosy on his forehead. So, even though he was the king he was forced to live out the rest of his life in isolation.

Isaiah 2-6 contains Isaiah’s messages to the

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king and the people. He uses harsh language to warn them against the dangers of pride, prosperity and self-reliance. He calls the people to trust and depend on God in good times.

Jotham was the son and successor of Uzziah. Their rule overlapped because his father was isolated by leprosy. He, too, was a pretty good king. He sought the Lord. Military might and prosperity were strong. He ruled as king for 16 years. And Isaiah continued to tell the people how they ought to live in good times.

After Jotham came his son Ahaz. He ruled for 20 years and things became progressively worse. Ahaz worshipped foreign gods. He oppressed the poor. He refused to trust God. And God punished Ahaz and the nation by sending two enemies to defeat them in war. The enemies were Syria and the northern Jewish kingdom of Ephraim.

Ahaz and Judah were humbled. They needed help. So Ahaz made an alliance with the powerful Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser III. The Assyrians rescued Judah but imposed very heavy taxes that ended the nation's prosperity.

Isaiah 7-12 records Isaiah's messages to the nation. They needed to know that the tough times they were facing were no coincidence. It was actually the punishment and judgment of God and they should repent and return to the Lord.

After Ahaz, but still during Isaiah's lifetime, came a very good king named Hezekiah. He was a huge improvement over his father Ahaz. He tried to be a good king and undo the damage that his father had done. He tried to break away from dependence on Assyria, but Assyria didn't like this and conquered most of the kingdom except for the capital city of Jerusalem.

Isaiah 13-39 reports what Isaiah said and did. He spoke God's word against Jerusalem's oppressive enemies and offered encouragement for the people who were still there assuring them that God was still the Lord.

Manasseh was the last king during Isaiah's time. Tradition says that Isaiah was killed because he was a prophet—by being sawed in half! Manasseh was definitely not a good king. He gave in to the Assyrians and did what they wanted. He welcomed the worship of other gods

and oppressed the people.

Isaiah 40-66 addresses the people during Manasseh's reign and beyond. Isaiah becomes a prophet who predicts when he tells about the nation being carried away into captivity by the Babylonians and a faithful few eventually returning to the land of Israel to start all over again. This was a time when people needed less confrontation and more hope. Isaiah assured them that even though the people had been unfaithful to God, God would remain faithful to the people.

There are two major messages Isaiah kept repeating to the political leaders and to the people. First of all, Isaiah kept asking them, "Who do you trust?" Do you trust your job? Do you trust your king? Do you trust your army? Do you trust yourself? Do you trust God?

It is a question for modern politicians and Americans as well. Who do we trust? Do we most trust Republicans or Democrats? Do we trust our bank account? Do we trust the United States of America? Do we trust our company, our job, our money, our possessions, our church membership? Or do we trust God?

If Isaiah were here today he would tell us that trust in anyone or anything but God will result in disaster. He would directly confront the foolishness of any replacement for God as the only One who is trustworthy for our lives and for our country.

Isaiah's second repeated message deals with judgment and hope. He kept promising the judgment of God on sin and the hope of God for those who were desperate. God doesn't tolerate sin indefinitely. He names the sins and he judges the sins.

Most of us don't like to be criticized. We don't like to have our faults or our sins pointed out. And we don't like the idea that God cares so much for us that he will intervene in our lives and, if need be, he will discipline us in order to stop us from doing what we should not do. But that was the prophet's message and it is still a true message for today. But God also offers hope to those who completely trust him. So, you can read some parts of Isaiah and get blasted for anything that is wrong. But other parts give enormous encouragement.

To understand Isaiah we need to understand how it fits with the rest of the Bible. Most of the 66 chapters of Isaiah are sermons. They are unlike the earlier parts of the Bible that are filled with history and stories about people. So, the first half of the Old Testament is mostly stories, the Psalms are songs and the rest of the Old Testament is mainly sermons that were given during the events that were reported earlier. (The Old Testament is not in chronological order.)

Let's make a comparison. For over 25 years I have been the senior pastor of Wooddale Church. During that time I have given more than a thousand sermons, almost all of which are available on cassette tape. Those sermons cover whole books of the Bible like Genesis, John and Revelation. Some of those series took more than a year. Other sermons were directly related to what was happening in history. There is a sermon about Nuclear Holocaust from the Cold War (teaching that God would not allow the earth to be destroyed by nuclear war, even though many people were thinking that was possible at the time). There was another sermon about Iraq that reviewed what the Bible said about God and Iraq (preached on a Sunday night to a full house!).

These sermons fit the times but they also had truth for all times. That's the way it was with the 66 chapters of Isaiah's sermons that were given over a 54-year period. If you understand how they fit together you will see that there are truths that are for all time as well as the specific applications of those truths for certain times. Let's look at a few sample sermons.

Isaiah 1 is sort of an all-purpose summary sermon to a nation that was rebelling against God. They were like children that have turned against their parents. He says they were worse than donkeys; at least donkeys will listen to their masters. He says they were really in bad shape because they turned against God. Religion wasn't good enough. God was sick of their rituals, prayers and offerings. He wanted them to turn

their hearts and heads back to him. In verse 11 and following the Lord said to them:

"The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me? I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings!"

It goes on to say that God won't listen to their prayers: "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen."

In chapter 5 Isaiah preached a real scorcher against the bad guys. He confronted those who bought up the homes of the poor to build mansions.

During a trip to Bucharest, Romania, I visited the palace of the former Romanian dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, who was killed in the Revolution of December 1989. This palace is the second largest building in the world, second only to the Pentagon in

square footage. It is opulent with 80-foot ceilings, huge marble pillars, custom carpets and more than 2000 chandeliers.

He tore down two church buildings, homes and businesses to prepare a site. He required people from across Romania to work for a month each year on his palace. Remember him when you read Isaiah's sermon in Isaiah 5:8-9:

Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land.

The Lord Almighty has declared in my hearing:

"Surely the great houses will become desolate, the fine mansions left without occupants."

Isaiah also confronted those who drink and

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party all the time, those who think they are smart when they are evil and those who call bad things good and good things bad.

In chapter 6 Isaiah's sermon is very personal. It tells about his personal encounter with God. In other words, this wasn't just a job for him. Isaiah was preaching to himself as well. He had a vision where he went to heaven and saw God. He admitted he was unworthy and God took his guilt away and commissioned him to speak.

Isaiah 20 is one of the shortest and most interesting of all the sermons!

Dramas are not new! We often have short dramas for teaching purposes in our church services. Some people like them and others don't. Probably everyone would dislike Isaiah's drama, although it certainly did make the point.

Assyria was Israel's oppressor. Many Hebrew people wanted an alliance with Egypt and Africa to beat off the Assyrians. Isaiah and God wanted them to trust God, not the Egyptians. So Isaiah performed a three-year drama in which he showed what would happen to the Egyptians they wanted to trust—they would end up being humiliated. The wardrobe for this drama was simple: Isaiah was completely naked! (This is a drama you will never see at Wooddale Church!).

But Isaiah's sermons weren't all bleak messages. They weren't all confrontation of sin. There were also messages of great hope like the one in Isaiah 40. When people turned to God, he offered hope. When people were desperate, he offered them comfort. He always pointed people back to God in every different circumstance of life.

Isaiah 40 is a sermon for people carried into captivity in Babylon, far from their home in Jerusalem. It was for them then, but it has been reread and loved by Christians for centuries. It is a reminder of God's goodness and love for tough times.

I doubt Isaiah would be very popular today. He was too blunt for most of us. But, don't miss his message!

Who do you trust? Do you trust God more than anything or anyone?

Remember that God still hates and judges sin!

Remember that God still comforts and helps those who turn to him!

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