

Isaiah 3:1-4:6
Alarms and Assurances
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Isaiah ministered to the nation of Judah when the nation was in rebellion against God. There was still a righteous remnant within the nation, a minority who were a people of faith, a minority who sought to keep covenant with God, to keep God's law as a way of life, and to worship God exclusively and sincerely. There were still such people in Judah, but they had long ago ceased to shape and lead the culture. They were no longer the movers and shakers of society. Yes, the culture at large did continue to give lip service to Jehovah and did continue to go through the motions of Mosaic worship, but their heart was elsewhere. What really excited them were the sinful thrills of worshipping pagan idols and amassing material wealth unjustly. The nation at large was in rebellion against the living and true God. Our passage for today is Isaiah's message to Judah at that time. This divinely inspired message is, of course, the appropriate message for such a time. The message is a combination of alarms and assurances, a combination of warnings and comforts. Isaiah warned the wicked within Judah that God's judgment was coming. There would be terrible historical judgments, but these would be but preludes to and foretastes of God's eternal judgment upon the wicked at the end of history. Isaiah assured the righteous that all would be well with them, and that the future belonged to them both in time and in eternity.

This same basic message is often applicable to our own day and age. The old testament nation of Israel has ceased to exist, but in this age all of the nations of earth belong to the resurrected Christ who sits at the right hand of God the Father. As the gospel spreads, as the church grows, the nations of the earth are disciplined. Over the past two millennia, the kingdom of God has been an important cultural influence in many nations and even the dominate cultural influence in several nations. There have been times when nations such as these have rebelled against God and Christ much as Judah did in the time of Isaiah. There was the French Revolution which went beyond a revolt against a corrupt government and a corrupt church to a rebellion against Biblical values and concepts. There was the atheistic Bolshevik revolution in Russia. There was the Nazi take over of Germany, the land of Luther. We experienced our own more limited cultural rebellion against God in the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Isaiah's basic message is applicable to all these historical contexts. God will judge the wicked both within history and for eternity. God will protect the righteous such that it will be well with them. The future belongs to the righteous both in history and for eternity.

We will now look at Isaiah's message under three headings: chaos, comfort and conquest.

We will begin, of course, by looking at the first heading, which is **chaos**. I am referring to the social chaos, the anarchy, which is so vividly described in much of today's passage. Whenever wickedness comes to prevail in a society, there is a breakdown in the social order. The breakdown here prophesied for Judah is

both severe and pervasive, both deep and wide. God is going to deprive them of everything they looked to for support and sustenance and stability.

Every society establishes an infrastructure to produce and distribute the basic necessities of life. People tend to take these provisions for granted, and they can forget how vulnerable, how fragile, how subject to disruption these systems are. We had a rude reminder recently when Hurricane Katrina disrupted part of our nation's system for refining and distributing gasoline, and gasoline prices became uncomfortably high for a season. Our own recent woes are a very minor disruption and discomfort compared to what Isaiah prophesied for Judah. God would take away "the stock and the store" (v. 1). This is a comprehensive phrase for every basic necessity of life. The most basic subsistence diet consists of bread and water, and the prophet said that God would take away even this. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." In that petition, bread as the staff of life represents all our basic needs. Similarly in this prophecy, bread and water are representative of all the basic necessities of life. God promises that if we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, God will provide for us all these basic necessities:

Matthew 6:31-33

- 31 "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'
- 32 "For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.
- 33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

The converse is also true. If we rebel against the kingdom of God and rebel against God's righteous standards, God can also withdraw these blessings which we tend to take for granted.

Next to food and water, a society's most valued assets are its trained and skilled people. These are the key individuals who manage and maintain the various social institutions which are necessary for a nation's survival. Isaiah said that God in judgment would also take these away from Judah. Our passage lists the people who are indispensably necessary for religion, government, the military and industry. Our passage even lists the evil occult diviner and enchanter along with the righteous prophet. In judgment, God would take away all those upon whom the people depended, even those who were illegitimate and immoral social supports and stays. God would take away all the key individuals who were maintaining their social structure. There were many ways in which God could have effected such a judgment. God did so through the Babylonians, whose policy was to take captive first all the leaders of a land.

2 Kings 24:14-16

- 14 Also [Nebuchadnezzar] carried into captivity all Jerusalem: all the captains and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths. None remained except the poorest people of the land.
- 15 And he carried Jehoiachin captive to Babylon. The king's mother, the king's wives, his officers, and the mighty of the land he carried into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon.

16 All the valiant men, seven thousand, and craftsmen and smiths, one thousand, all who were strong and fit for war, these the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon.

When the experienced leaders were taken away, others less capable had to step in to fill the void (v. 4). The prophet characterized these replacements as women and children. He probably didn't mean literal women and children but was referring to those who lacked the maturity, training and disposition to fulfill these challenging roles. God judged the nation with leaders who were inexperienced, incompetent and also immoral.

12 As for My people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them. O My people! Those who lead you cause you to err, and destroy the way of your paths.

After the loss of relatively competent leadership would come anarchy. Ordinary people would start taking advantage of the situation and begin oppressing one another (v. 5). Because of the weakened leadership, there would be a sense that the arm of the law had been shortened, a sense that crime had begun to pay. The youth would become insolent and show disrespect to their elders. The less educated and less skilled classes of society would become disrespectful of their social superiors. As I read this prophecy, I am reminded of Mao's Cultural Revolution, and of our own country in the 1960s when many young people snidely regarded anyone over 30 as stupid and incompetent.

Isaiah prophesied that God would judge Judah with a lack of leadership. In normal times, people compete for positions of leadership. In normal times, people want to be at the helm of state. The prophet said that this would not be so in the day of judgment. There would be a desperate search for people to take the reins of leadership, but no one would be willing. All those recruited would refuse to serve because they recognized the futility of the task. They realized that Jerusalem had stumbled and that Judah had fallen. The situation was too desperate and beyond remedy.

In verse 13 and following, God made His case against the corrupt leaders and their wives. The picture is a trial with God as prosecutor. God accused the leaders of plundering the poor, of amassing wealth through afflicting the disadvantaged and taking advantage of them. God then addressed the haughty rich women of Judah, who were probably the wives and daughters of these corrupt leaders. These women used their wealth to purchase all kinds of elaborate clothing and jewelry as a basis for social snobbery. The prophet described in most graphic detail the absolute reversal of their privileged situation which would occur on the day of judgment when pagan armies would overrun the land. I don't have time to discuss this in great detail, but our text is clear enough. As we read this sad description of judgment, we need to remember the message of verse 9: "... they have brought evil upon themselves." They and not God would be responsible for the evil circumstances which would come upon them.

We have looked at our first point, which is chaos. Our second point is **comfort**. I am thinking about verses 10 and 11:

- 10 "Say to the righteous that it shall be well with them, for they shall eat the fruit of their doings.
- 11 Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him, for the reward of his hands shall be given him.

These two verses are referring to the doctrine called the judgment according to works. This is not a reference to salvation by works or to legalism. For the righteous, judgment according to works is grace upon grace upon grace. As an act of free and undeserved grace, God intervenes in the lives of those whom He chooses to save to the glory of His mercy. He sends His Holy Spirit upon them to work faith in their hearts and to unite them to Christ. Through that union, which is experienced as faith, the righteous partake of the benefits of the saving work of Jesus. Their sins are forgiven based upon the atoning work of the cross, and Jesus' righteous record is imputed to them. They immediately obtain a perfect legal standing before Holy God. But God also begins working within them and upon them, renewing them in the image of God and enabling them to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness. God transforms them into a people zealous for good works, and then God rewards them for the good works which they do, not because God owes them anything but because God in His goodness chooses to do so. This is grace upon grace upon grace.

The wicked, in contrast, receive not mercy but justice. They receive what they deserve, and they are judged in accordance with their wicked works.

Our passage says that it will be well for the righteous. This does not mean that in the coming hard days, they would experience no suffering. This doesn't mean that none of the righteous would die during these difficult times. What it means is that the righteous would never experience the wrath of God. They may suffer, but it won't be from divine wrath. God may chasten them as a loving father, but He won't pour out His wrath upon them. And God will be with them in their suffering, will take them through their suffering, and will use their suffering for their ultimate good. Yea, though they walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with them as a good Shepherd, and His rod and His staff they comfort them. Also, the suffering of the righteous is temporary, limited to this life and not a foretaste of suffering to come in eternity.

We have looked at our first two points, chaos and comfort. Our last point is **conquest**. The future belongs to the righteous. They will emerge as the victors both in history and in eternity. A righteous remnant will survive the difficult days which Isaiah prophesied, and they will overcome. Their numbers will be enlarged through revival, and they are the people of destiny. These people are among God's elect, those whose names in eternity past were written in the Book of Life. These people are among those whom Christ delivers from their sins and transforms into a people zealous for good works.

The reason the righteous remnant will prevail is because the Messiah will come as their champion and deliverer.

Isaiah 4:2

2 In that day the Branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious; and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and appealing for those of Israel who have escaped.

The kingdom of David is here compared to a mighty tree. In the day of judgment, during the time of the Babylonian Exile, that tree is chopped down. David's throne is toppled and His crown is cast to the ground. But there is still life in the roots, and out of that hewn stump comes a mighty Shoot, a descendant of David, a Branch destined to tower over all the kingdoms of this world. This Branch is "of the Lord." His origins are divine, and the New Testament makes clear the radical extent to which this is true. The Messiah was God the Son taking to Himself a true and full human nature.

Our passage has a parallel expression, "the fruit of the earth." This parallel expression may also be a reference to the Messiah with the emphasis on His humanity. In His humanity, He was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary and was the fruit of her flesh. He was the prophesied Seed of woman, and He was born in the land, in the town of Bethlehem, the city of David. As Isaiah would later prophesy, the Messiah shall grow up before the LORD as a tender plant and as a root out of dry ground.

In contrast to the false beauty of the haughty women, the Messiah fills the land with true beauty and glory. As the apostle John would later say, "We beheld His glory, glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

The Messiah will come with His winnowing fork in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

The Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Upon the wicked, the Messiah will pour out the fire of judgment. He will purge away the moral filth and violence of the land with the fire of judgment. He does this within history to a degree, as illustrated by His using first the armies of Babylon and later the armies of Rome to destroy the earthly city of Jerusalem in judgment. He will pour out the fire of judgment at the end of history with a perfect finality.

Upon the people of God, the Messiah will pour out His Holy Spirit and make them a new creation. The prophet used the metaphor of the fiery cloud which accompanied the people of God in the wilderness. The fiery cloud protected them; at the Red Sea, it served as a protective barrier between Israel and the armies of Pharaoh. The fiery cloud guided them; it led Israel through the wilderness and indicated when they were to move and when they were to rest. The fiery cloud provided personal communion with God; the fiery cloud descended upon the Holy of Holies and dwelt there as Immanuel, as the Shekinah Glory, as God dwelling in the midst of His people.

Under the old covenant, the Shekinah Glory dwelt only in the Holy of Holies first in the tabernacle and later in the temple. In the age of the Messiah, in the age of the new covenant, the glory cloud will be a covering for all of Mount Zion, for all the

assemblies, for all the people of God. The Spirit of God will come upon God's people in new covenant fullness and glory. All of Mount Zion will be glorious, not just the Holy of Holies, and God will be over all the glory as a protective covering.

Isaiah 4:5b-6

- 5 ... For over all the glory there will be a covering.
6 And there will be a tabernacle for shade in the daytime from the heat, for a place of refuge, and for a shelter from storm and rain.

As the hymnist expressed this,

Round each habitation hov'ring,
See the cloud and fire appear
For a glory and a cov'ring,
Showing that the Lord is near: ...
[“Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”]

The initial judgment which Isaiah prophesied came upon old testament Israel centuries, even millennia ago. Yet we still live in the midst of the fulfillment of this prophecy. Jesus has come in all His beauty and glory and excellence. And He is still baptizing with His Holy Spirit, and He is still baptizing with the fire of judgment.

Look to Christ today in faith as your Savior and Lord. Unite with Him in faith, and He will absorb the fire of judgment for you. Jesus was baptized with God's wrath against sin when He suffered upon the cross, and He did this as a substitute for all

who believe in Him. Look to Christ in faith, and He will pour out upon you not the fire of judgment but the spiritually enabling Holy Spirit. You deserve the fiery judgment, but Jesus offers you instead the fiery cloud “as a glory and a covering.” Which will it be?