



"THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME"
ISAIAH 61:1

THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

CHAPTER 1

AND HIS NAME
WILL BE CALLED
WONDERFUL COUNSELOR,
MIGHTY GOD,
EVERLASTING FATHER,
PRINCE OF
PEACE.
ISAIAH 9:6

Isaiah is called "The Book of Salvation." The name *Isaiah* means "the salvation of the Lord" or "the Lord is salvation." Isaiah is the first book containing the writings of the prophets of the Bible. And the author, Isaiah, who is called the Prince of Prophets, shines above all the other writers and prophets of Scripture. His mastery of the language, his rich and vast vocabulary, and his poetic skill have earned him the title, "Shakespeare of the Bible." He was educated, distinguished, and privileged, yet remained a deeply spiritual man. He was committed to obedience over the long haul of his 55-60 year ministry as a prophet of God. He was a true patriot who loved his country and his people. Strong tradition suggests that he died a martyr's death under the reign of King Manasseh by being placed within the hollow of a tree trunk and sawed in two.

Isaiah's calling as a prophet was primarily to the nation of Judah (the southern kingdom) and to Jerusalem, urging the people to repent from their sins and return to God. He also foretold the coming of the Messiah and the salvation of the Lord. Many of his prophecies predicted events that occurred in Isaiah's near future, yet at the same time they foretold the events of the distant future (such as the coming of the Messiah), and even some events still to come in the last days (such as the second coming of Christ).

In summary, the message of Isaiah is that salvation comes from God—not man. God alone is Savior, Ruler and King.

Commentary on the book of Isaiah is by noted theologian Rev. William G. Most (1914-1999). His contributions to theology have been recognized all over the world. He published 12 books and a host of articles on topics ranging from biblical studies to Mariology and Latin grammar.

Book of Isaiah

Summary of Chapter 1

**In the times of Kings Uzziah, Jothan, Ahaz and Hezekiah,
Isaiah saw a vision from God about Jerusalem.**

He calls on the people to listen, for God has spoken. God complains that He has brought up children who have rebelled against Him. Even dumb animals, the ox and the ass, know their master: yet Israel does not recognize its master and its father. It is a sinful people, full of wickedness who have provoked the Holy One to anger. Why should they act so as to call for further chastisements? Already their whole head is sick, their heart is faint. There is no sound part of that body from head to foot. Everywhere there are bruises, sores, bleeding wounds that have not been cared for or bandaged. So the country is desolate, the villages are burned: foreigners devour their land. It is desolate. Daughter Zion is left like a tent in a vineyard, like a shelter

He says their silver has become dross - which is the impurities removed in the process of purifying silver. A sulphide ore of lead was a source of silver. The ore was put into a shallow cup. A blast of hot air in the furnace would oxidize the lead, and leave the silver. Lye might be added to speed up the process. In Jeremiah 6:27-30 God tells Jeremiah He will make him a refiner of silver - but his attempts to refine the people were in vain, so they were rejected. Hence God Himself (Jer 9:7) said He would refine and test them Himself - referring to the fall of Jerusalem and the temple.

The silver may refer to the rulers of Jerusalem. For certain they are in mind when he speaks of them as thieves, loving bribes. They do not help the widow and the orphan.

Hence, in 24-26 God says, in some versions, that He will "get relief", and "avenge" Himself on them. The words "get relief," Hebrew <nham>, can indicate He has been burdened by their empty sacrifices, and now will get relief by acting to set things right. But His acting will be not what the English word <avenge> implies, it is more strictly the sense of Hebrew <naqam>, used in v. 24, which means action by the highest authority to correct things, whether it be favorable or unfavorable to the persons affected (thus in Judges 11:36 there is vindication for Israel, but punishment for enemies. Cf. also Isaiah 59. 15b-18 where both <yesha> and <naqam> are used in the sense of punishment, even though <yesha> usually means saving.

Vengeance is really an exercise of hatred, willing evil to another so it may be evil to him - the opposite of love, which is willing good to another for the other's sake. God does not hate or act in hatred, (naqam) is rather His righting of the objective order. Cf. Simeon ben Eleazar (<Tosefta, Kiddushin> 1. 14): "He [anyone] has committed a transgression: woe to him, he has tipped the scale to the side of debt for himself and for the whole world". Cf. also Paul VI, doctrinal introduction to his Constitution on Indulgences of Jan 1, 1967.

God here threatens punishment, but it is for the sake of repentance and purification. Hence He adds that He will bring back judges as they once were and Jerusalem will be called a city of righteousness, faithful city. But that really was far in the future, after the end of the Babylonian exile, 539 BC.

He says they will be ashamed of their sacred oaks and groves, where the Jews, like the Canaanites, used to offer sacrifices to pagan gods. They thought they were getting fertility - but it will turn out to be the opposite, all will become tinder for fire.

End of Chapter 1

in a field of cucumbers, like a city under siege. If the God of armies had not let a remnant survive, Israel would have been totally wiped out like Sodom, like Gomorrah.

Now the prophet calls on the rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah—that is, Jerusalem. Yes, they offer so many sacrifices, but God has more than enough of those animals and their blood, for the offerings are meaningless, mere externalism, with no interior dispositions. He says He cannot put up with their New Moons and Sabbaths. The people spread out their hands in prayer, but God will not look, for their hands are really full of blood. So they should stop doing evil and seek what is morally right, and help the oppressed, defend those who are fatherless and the widows. If they do that, then he appeals to their good sense: cannot they see that if they do as He asks He will listen to them? Even if their past sins have been as red as scarlet, He will cleanse them to be as clean as fresh wool. If they do this they will eat the best, and the sword will not come upon them. God has spoken!

But no, in actuality, the city that was once faithful has become a harlot. Once there was righteousness and justice in Jerusalem, but now instead He sees murderers. Their silver, probably meaning their rulers, has turned to dross (rubbish), and their wine which once was choice, is now heavily watered. It is because their rulers rebel against God, going after bribes and gifts. They do this instead of taking up rightly the case of the fatherless and the widows. Therefore His hand, which once was turned against their enemies, will now turn on them to put things right. But His action will result in cleansing their dross, and taking away their impurities. Then He will give them judges as in days of old and wise counselors. After this is all over it will be called a faithful city, a city of righteousness. Those who are penitent will be redeemed with righteousness, but rebels and sinners will be broken. They who have forsaken the Lord are going to perish.

They will be ashamed then of their sacred oaks which they once cultivated. Their gardens will dry up. Mighty men will burn together with their works, and no one will quench the fire.

Comments on Chapter 1

Of what period of history is Isaiah speaking here? As usual, we cannot be sure. A large possibility is the constant threat of Assyria. Another is the fact that after the Syro-Ephramitic war Pekah had destroyed the army of Achaz, and the Edomites and Philistines invaded Judah. Jerusalem too was threatened.

But the chief message is clear. God calls heaven and earth to witness to the fact that His people have been wicked. Even brute animals, such as the ox and ass, know their master: these people do not know their Father. (The mention of the ox and ass here may have suggested putting those animals in Christmas cribs). The people are loaded with guilt, they have forsaken the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah is fond of the expression, the Holy One. God's holiness means basically that He observes what is morally right in all His actions. Cf. Psalm 11:7: "God is morally right [<sadiq>], and He loves the things that are morally right [<sedaqoth>]." Quite a contrast to the gods of Mesopotamia, who seem to have been amoral, acting as if there were no such thing as morality, or the Greek Zeus, a big time adulterer, or Roman Jupiter. Cf. Ez 28:2: "Behold I am against you, O Sidon. . . and they shall know that I am the Lord when I inflict punishments on her, and I shall show myself holy in her [<niqdash>]." Cf. also Is 5:15-16: "God, the Holy One, will show Himself holy by moral rightness." (We do find even in paganism some who speak of the God as morally right and the guardian of justice. Socrates did this. It was at times said in Mesopotamia, from where the Jews came. Cf. Wolfram von Soden, <The Ancient Orient>, tr. D. Schley, Eerdmans, 1994, pp. 131, 142, 248).

The prophet asks if they want to be beaten still more? It seems they have hardened themselves, and do not understand even when there is no sound part from head to toe in them. Their country is desolate, cannot they see? Does he mean the desolation is already at hand, or is he, with prophetic vision, looking ahead? The Daughter of Zion means the Daughter that is Zion (the hill on which were built the palace and temple). Yet God's mercy has left them a remnant, they are not completely wiped out, so they are not like Sodom and Gomorrah, which were totally destroyed.

Now Isaiah picks upon the notion of Sodom, and calls the rulers of Jerusalem the rulers of Sodom. Did he refer to homosexuality there? We know from all the major prophets what kind of sins Jerusalem committed: social injustice, not defending the widow and orphan, instead, going for bribes. But this does not mean that Isaiah did not know what the real sin of Sodom was. Cf. Jude 7: "Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." This is confirmed abundantly by the Inter-testamental Jewish literature.

God says He cannot stand their sacrifices and festivals, He is weary of them. Some time ago, commentators often made the mistake of saying the major prophets were all against sacrifice. But no, they objected to empty externalism. We can gather the right concept of sacrifice from Isaiah 29:13: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." We see there are two elements, lips, the externals, and hearts, the interior dispositions. The outward sign should be a means of expressing the interior, which is basically obedience to God's will. The external without the interior is worthless, arouses God's anger instead of pleasing Him. The Jews of Isaiah's day enjoyed the externals, answering prayers, singing, joining in processions - but it was all just empty: they disobeyed the will of God in not caring for widows and orphans, and instead oppressed them for financial gain. Even the sacrifice of Jesus would have been worthless without obedience: cf. Romans 5:19.

Isaiah then urges them to stop doing evil, to do what is good, to seek what is right, to help the oppressed. To most persons this does not sound strange, but to some Protestant commentators this creates a problem, to a thorough Lutheran it is unacceptable. For in his major work, *The Bondage of the Will*, (tr. J. L. Packer & O. R. Johnston, Revell, Old Tappan., 1957) Luther explicitly denies free will (p. 273) and adds that a human being is like a horse (pp. 103-04): either God or Satan may ride him, and accordingly he does good or evil and goes to heaven or hell. The human has nothing to say about which one rides him (pp. 103-04). Yet all Scripture testifies we do have free will, or else all the exhortations to turn to God, to repent, to do good, all over Scripture, are all mockery. St. Paul gives us a fascinating problem. In one set of texts (2 Cor 3:5, Phil 2:13) he says we cannot get a good thought of ourselves, or make a good decision, or carry it out. In the other set (e. g., 2 Cor 6:1) he says what Isaiah says here, that when grace comes, it is our decision whether it comes in vain or not. How to fit together these two sets of texts is a problem that has been a subject of hot controversy over the centuries. It is, of course, no answer at all to simply deny free will, as Luther did. We know the texts can be reconciled, for Scripture does not contradict itself, but how to reconcile the texts is debated. For a new proposal which fully accepts all texts, cf. Wm. Most, <New Answers to Old Questions> (London, 1971).

Verses 18-20 also raise a problem for Protestants. God asks the people to think it over: even if their sins are scarlet, they shall be as white as wool. The favorite classic Protestant tactic here is to say this means only <acquittal>. The sinner is not really made white as wool - God throws the merits of Christ, like a cloak, over him, and refuses to look underneath where all is total corruption. If we recall that in the same line of thinking, that man has no free will - this may fit. But 2 Peter 1:4 says we become sharers in the divine nature; 1 Cor 3:16 and 6:19 say we become temples of the Holy Spirit - who would not like to dwell in total corruption; and we become capable for the face to face vision of God in the next life (1 Cor 13:12) -- hardly possible for someone totally corrupt, for as Malachi 3:23 says, "He is like a refiner's fire. Who can stand when He appears?" Even now we become white as wool, and even, as St. Paul puts it, "a new creation" (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). Creation is making something out of nothing, not putting a white cloak over total corruption.

But the faithful city has become a harlot. Isaiah is not just using rose-colored glasses here. Jerusalem once was faithful to God, in the time of David, and the first part of the reign of Solomon, and under some good kings, such as Jehoshaphat. The imagery behind these lines is that Jerusalem is the bride of God, and so must be faithful (a theme much developed in Hosea). But she has become unfaithful, has gone into association with the Assyrians, who require that Assyrian idols be placed in Jerusalem.