

"You turn things around! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay; that the thing made should say to its maker, 'He did not make me'; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'? (Isaiah 29:16)

Last week, in Isaiah 28, we began a new series of lessons on "prophesies of judgment and blessing," with Isaiah looking at life as it was with the Jewish people at the time he was writing the book of Isaiah--first in the northern kingdom of Israel (referred to as Ephraim), then in the southern kingdom of Judah.

He began with a "woe" to the "proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim, and to the fading flower of its glorious beauty..."--a metaphor for its "stumbling and bumbling" way of life during its last decades of existence! Ripe for judgment and ready to be "swallowed up" by God's strong and mighty agent, Sennacherib and the Assyrians, who Isaiah likened to one who sees the "first-ripe fig" prior to the summer harvest and "plucks it off, pops it in his mouth, and swallows it"! And just like that, the soon and sudden end of Ephraim!

But Isaiah (true to form) also prophesies that there would come "a day" (speaking of the future millennium, we believe) when the Lord of hosts would turn things around and "become a beautiful crown and a glorious diadem to the remnant of His people"!

Then Isaiah focused on the southern kingdom of Judah, finding it in even worse condition than the northern kingdom, because Ahaz and its other leaders were placing their trust (for their security and well-being) in alliances with pagan nations rather than in the God of Jacob! And they scoffed at, and mocked, Isaiah for the simplicity and persistence with which he delivered the Lord's message of coming judgment! And Isaiah responded by predicting that because of their "covenant with death and Sheol" (speaking of their alliances) they would hear, through "stammering lips and a foreign tongue," a "blah, blah, blah" message that they wouldn't understand that would lead to an "overwhelming scourge" of the land of Judah, bringing "sheer terror" to its people, rather than hearing a message of "rest for the weary" from the Lord God, in words that they would be able to understand but which they would not listen to, even though it offered a "firmly placed foundation" that would "leave them undisturbed"!

And that sets the scene for last night's lesson on Isaiah 29 where Isaiah begins with another "woe"! This time to the city of Jerusalem, which he called "Ariel"! "Woe, O Ariel!" A code name for Jerusalem, meaning "lion of God"! But "lion" just happened to be a symbol also for Assyria! So Wiersbe suggests that Isaiah may have been implying that Assyria was now God's lion (or being used as God's lion) and with Jerusalem God's lion (at this point) in name only" (because of its failure to "have a heart for God or listen to His message through Isaiah)!

The Hebrew word for Ariel also means "an altar hearth"--where burnt offerings were sacrificed! Isaiah prophesies (in verse 4) that "the city would be brought low"! God would humble the proud city of Jerusalem! (Wiersbe says the city would "become like the altar and God would make His people the sacrifice"!)

And so the opening verses of Isaiah 29 picture the imminent assault of Sennacherib and the Assyrian army (although not specifically named here) as they build "great ramparts and siege towers" and get ready to storm the "city of lamenting and mourning"! It looks all but over!

But, suddenly, God would (miraculously!) "turn things around"! Isaiah says (beginning in verse 5) that "the multitude of your enemies will become like fine dust...and the ruthless ones (clearly speaking of the Assyrians) like the chaff which blows away, and that it would happen suddenly"! (This event is described

in more detail in Isaiah 37:33-37, where Isaiah tells how "an angel of the Lord went out and struck 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians...and so Sennacherib, king of Assyria, departed and went home"--and the Assyrians would never again to be a threat to God's people!)

(You'd think that such a great victory would bring all of Jerusalem and Judah back to fully trusting in the Lord but, as Wiersbe notes, after the death of Hezekiah, they would return to their sin and rebellion--and God would eventually (in His own time) send the Babylonians to utterly conquer Jerusalem, destroy the temple, and carry away a multitude of Jews into captivity! The city, indeed, would become Ariel, like an "altar hearth," and many would be "sacrificed"!

Motyer writes that "The Lord purposed an eleventh hour deliverance for Zion, but historical deliverance doesn't change hearts and the problem is spiritual and needs a deeper solution"!

In verses 6-8, Isaiah seems to be looking far down the road of history at a future day "when the Lord of hosts would send thunder and loud noise, with whirlwind and tempest and the flame of a consuming fire...on all the nations who wage war on Ariel..."! As also prophesied in Zachariah 14:1-4 and in Revelation 19:11-21! Motyer notes that "the Creator remains in direct control of what He created, and it lies, in all its huge force, at His disposal: the audible (thunder), the visible (fire), the invisible (the windstorm and tempest), with power to shake (an earthquake), remove (through a windstorm), and consume (with fire)"! Do you believe our sovereign God is working in our world today?

In verses 9-14, Isaiah again returns to the theme of the "blindness of mechanical religion"--where "this people draw near the Lord with their words and honor Him with their lips," but where "their hearts are removed far from Him"! And so another "woe" to those who "turn things around" by making plans on their own, without God and, if effect (as MacArthur notes) "reject the Creator, and question the sovereignty of God"! ("Does the clay think itself equal with the potter?")

But Isaiah ends this chapter again by prophesying that God "on that day" (a day still to come!) will once again "turn things around"--and, among other things, that:

- "The (devastated) forests of Lebanon will become like a fertile field"!
- "The deaf will hear and the eyes of the blind will see!"
- "The afflicted will increase their gladness in the Lord!"
- "The ruthless will come to an end and the scorner finished!"

And, Isaiah concludes that (on that day!) "the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, will say that house of Jacob will no longer be ashamed when he sees his children sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and stand in awe of the God of Israel"! (MacArthur notes that "Israel in her history has frequently suffered disgrace, but that after the salvation of Israel, in the end time, the children of Jacob will no longer cause their forefathers to blush at their wickedness"!)

As Rod Turk noted, Psalm 1 and 8 provide a fitting epilogue for this lesson!

"How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked!"

And who is not blind to our sovereign God's working in our world today!

The One who can "turn things around"!

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