

"Comfort, O comfort My people, says your God!" (Isaiah 40:1)

How should we understand and describe the transition from the first 39 chapters of Isaiah to the final 27 chapters--and the essence and key themes of those final 27 chapters--as a "preview" of what's ahead for us when we plunge back into our MOB study, beginning in September?

John Edwards, in his book on Isaiah, writes that "when one turns from the thirty-ninth chapter to the fortieth chapter, it's as though he steps out of the darkness of judgment into the light of salvation"!

Constable notes that "whereas the first portion of the book is filled with messages of judgment, the second portion emphasizes restoration and deliverance"!

Motyer writes that "no sooner the message of disaster (in Isaiah 39:5-7), then a message of comfort and consolation" (beginning with Isaiah 40:1)...even though "disaster must fall on unfaithfulness"!

The apostle Paul addressed this dilemma in Romans 10:21-11:2: "But as for Israel, 'All day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.' I say, then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew!"

MacArthur writes that while the prophecies of Isaiah 1-39 addressed Judah in her situation during Isaiah's ministry (739-690 B.C.), the prophecies of chapters 40-66 address Judah as though the prophesied Babylonian captivity was already a present reality, though it didn't begin until almost a century later!

When Isaiah wrote this account, Babylon was not yet a world power! Who would have thought it would be Babylon and not Assyria who would rule, or that the Medes and Persians, and a king named Cyrus would arise and be used by God (as His servant) to defeat the Babylonians--and, later, issue a decree allowing the Jews to return to their land and rebuild the walls and the temple of God? Isaiah's words were obviously inspired by God to envision the course the international scene would take (long after his passing)!

Constable notes that as we get into these last 27 chapters of Isaiah, we "emerge suddenly" in a different world from what Hezekiah faced! Like we wake up 150 years later on the far side of the disaster, near the end of the captivity, with liberation in the air and the promise of a "new exodus" with God as its head! And a coming Messiah! And a glorious kingdom! With nothing much mentioned about the actual years of the Babylonian exile! (Interestingly, we have to turn to Psalm 137:1 to get a sense of the pain and suffering the people endured: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion"!)

Note how Isaiah 40 begins! "Comfort, O comfort My people!" Words God instructed Isaiah to write for the people who would one day (a century later?) be captive in a foreign land, many miles from their home in Jerusalem!

Comfort! One of the main themes (in Isaiah 40-48) in the first of three major sections of these final 27 chapters of Isaiah! Where Isaiah notes the "greatness of God" whose glory would be revealed as He delivers His people from captivity in Babylon, using His anointed, Cyrus, who "just happens" to rise to the occasion!

Note how Isaiah describes the greatness of God in this section! "Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning? ...Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars... He calls them all by name! His understanding is inscrutable; He gives strength to the weary...Those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength...They will walk and not grow weary! Do not fear for I am with you...I will strengthen you... Sing to the Lord a new song! I will make darkness into light...! I, even I, am the Lord!" And so much more! Do you think these words might have brought comfort to the those in exile? (Take some time, maybe this summer, to read and meditate on all the great verses yourself!)

In the second section (chapters 49-57), Isaiah addresses the more serious problem of Israel's sin (the "sin problem") that resulted in her captivity! By sending Israel's "Deliverer"! The Suffering Servant! Moving from dealing with a physical deliverance to dealing with spiritual salvation! From Cyrus to Christ!

Wiersbe writes that "the heart of Isaiah 40-66 is the section on chapters 49-57, in which Isaiah exalts the Messiah, and that the heart of chapters 49-57 is Isaiah 53:13-53:12 with its description of the Savior's 'substitutionary death' for the sin of the world"! No wonder this section is often called the "New Testament section of Isaiah" and that Isaiah is called the "evangelical prophet"!

And, finally, the third section of these 27 chapters (Isaiah 58-66)! Which deals with Israel's glorious future, with the consummations of God's restoration of Israel and the world! Pictures the "redeemed" of the Lord! Redeemed from captivity (chapters 40-48), redeemed from sin (49-55) to become the servants of God that He intended them to be! Motyer notes: "waiting for the expected glory of a new creation"!

As Jim Battle noted, this passage goes beyond deliverance of God's people from Babylonian captivity, and beyond redemption of people from their sin, to "a change in the cosmos and the Lord's restoration of His created order"! Wow!

Wiersbe writes that "Isaiah saw in Israel's restoration from Babylon a 'preview' of what God would do for them at the end of the age, after the 'day of the Lord' and the destruction of the 'last Babylon"! Can only imagine!

It's no surprise that God's people for centuries have turned to these passages in Isaiah to find comfort and assurance in the difficult days of life! And it's probably not a coincidence that Michael Easley would preach a sermon this past Sunday from II Corinthians 1:3-7 about "the God of all comfort"! Who "comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God"! Wow!

This was only a "preview"! See you in September, Lord willing!

Meanwhile! Be comforted!

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