Isaiah Intro #7  Chapters 56-66

The closing chapters of Isaiah’s prophecy give us a wonderfully clear summary of the message of this book. Here we find a pretty straightforward logical sequence that addresses the human condition, God’s expectations for humanity, and the promised future of the world.

One of the things that has really struck me as I’ve been reading through this book in the last week has been just how remarkably consistent this message is when compared to the others books of the Bible. Especially in the New Testament, we see these same themes from Isaiah explained over and over again – particularly in the life and the teaching of Jesus himself. Jesus clearly saw himself and his ministry as inextricably linked to Isaiah’s vision. So much so, in fact, that the first time we see Jesus teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, what he chooses to quote is a passage from today’s section of our Isaiah reading: “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor.”

Jesus understood himself to be preaching the same message that Isaiah preached hundreds of years earlier – and not only preaching it, but fully embodying it in his life, death, and resurrection. And even beyond the teaching of Jesus, the themes of Isaiah feature prominently in many other biblical writings. For example: in so many ways, the entire book of Revelation appears to be re-telling the prophecy of Isaiah – often using direct quotes! So clearly, this book of poetic prophecy features prominently in the theological imaginations of both Christians and Jews throughout the centuries.

So what do these closing chapters teach us about this vision? For one thing, it starts with a fundamental problem in the life of humanity and the world. There is no peace. There is pain, suffering, and a general sense of abandonment for a vast number of human beings alive today. Isaiah knows this pain, and he cries out boldly: “You who remind the LORD, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem!” The message of the prophet is rooted in the aching desire for a society and a world that embodies the peace, the shalom, the life that we all long for. And Isaiah acknowledges that God our maker is the only hope for a final solution. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence!”

But God reminds Isaiah, and through Isaiah all of us, that God is not some great Santa Claus in the sky, who exists to simply grant our wishes. God is the sovereign of the universe, and as such expects human beings to live as they have been taught. “See, the LORD’s hand is not too short to save. Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God.”

So then the critical point for all those who would seek to live as they have been commanded... the question of what exactly God expects of us. Everyone in the world seems to have their own (often conflicting) opinions about what God expects from us. Some of us might be surprised to hear the answer that the biblical authors give us:

“Announce to the people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinances of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. ‘Why do we fast, but you do not see?’ [they say.] ‘Why do we humble ourselves, but you do not notice?’ Look, you serve your own interests on your fast day, and you oppress all your workers!”
“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see them naked, to cover them? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and you healing shall spring up quickly.”

There may be some questions about how to interpret the prophecy of Isaiah when it comes down to minor details, but one thing is unambiguous throughout: God demands a society of justice that takes care of the poor and the marginalized. Period. And the proper response to this revelation is a humble heart that is willing to admit where it has gone wrong. “For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and lofty place, and also with those who are humble and contrite in spirit.”

We are left with a clear mission for our lives and for our society. “Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance will be revealed.” If you do as you have been told, “The LORD will guide you continually.”

And the place that God is guiding us to is to a world utterly transformed. In the New Testament, this is called the vision of the ‘kingdom of God’ – a new world order where every bit of life on earth is subjected to the will of God – resulting in the very fabric of the universe being made new and whole and complete. It is the life we long for, fulfilled by the one savior with the ability to make it happen. It is this hope, this future, that inspires our hearts and minds and drives us to transform the systems of the world around us even now. We know we’re moving toward the kingdom of God, when every tear will be wiped away and the lion and the lamb will graze together – and our proper response to that hope is to embrace it and live it immediately.

“Arise, shine! For your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen on you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will rise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

“I will appoint Peace as your overseer, and Righteousness as your taskmaster. Violence shall no more be heard in your land... you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise.”

“Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.”

“For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the LORD; so shall your descendants and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the LORD.”

“I am the LORD; in its time I will accomplish it quickly.”

As always, we’re left with the question of faith. Can we believe this good news? At the end of the day, it’s a question that each person has to answer for themselves.

“Thus says the LORD: heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool... all these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.”