

Isaiah Intro #5 Chapters 34-48

So by now we know that this text is all about judgment and restoration. Isaiah presents God as deeply angry about the injustice in the world. Chapter 34 begins with a good reminder of this anger:

**“Draw near, O nations, to hear; O peoples, give heed!
For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against their hordes.”**

In the midst of the destructive nature of the language of judgment in this book, it is easy to get lost and miss the point. I think this is a good time to make a note about the way this language is used in prophetic literature – and the ways that it probably should and should not be used by us today.

There’s no way around the fact that prophetic invectives are *hyperbolic* by design. This is an intentionally *emotional* style of speaking and writing. And that has implications for the way we are supposed to understand and use it. Take, for example, this statement of judgment against the land of Edom in chapter 34:

“And the streams of Edom shall be turned to pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lay waste; no one shall ever pass through it forever and ever... they shall give it the name ‘No Kingdom Is There.’”

Like much of the language in Isaiah, this proclamation about the doomed-ness of Edom is extreme. Her smoke shall go up forever, and no one will ever walk on this land ever again. So...how are we supposed to read that?

One way of reading it might be to take it literally. That these specific things were predicted for the actual land of Edom – sulfur, pitch, burning that never ends, and no human inhabitant until the end of time. But this way of reading the text gets problematic when you look at a map of the modern Middle East. This nation of Edom that is spoken against by Isaiah is the land now occupied by parts of the modern political states of Israel and Jordan. Google Maps seems to indicate several shopping malls and public parks that currently reside on land that is supposed to be burning with an endless sulfur-and-pitch fire. What do we do with that?

It turns out that when you get familiar with the literary style of prophetic and apocalyptic biblical texts, the paradox begins to unravel a bit. The style of prophetic judgment passages *intentionally* makes use of hyperbole. And it does so for a very good reason. It is designed to expose just how serious the world’s condition is, and just how unacceptable it is in the eyes of God. When you read these texts, there is *no way* to miss the point, because it assaults us at every level of our human perception: the world system that subverts God’s plan for justice and peace will certainly fail. Its smoke will go up forever. It is doomed. Get out of it. Jump ship. There’s nothing left for you here. It’s a wasteland.

(By the way, using this lens for prophetic and apocalyptic literature also helps make a lot more sense of some critical New Testament passages that describe personal and worldwide judgment. But we’ll save that for another time.)

These extensive passages of judgment against the systems of the world also serve another key purpose: to bring hope to those who are currently marginalized and oppressed by the powers. Isaiah says:

“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the weak knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear!’ For here is your God.”

Isaiah's prophecy never waivers in its vision of ultimate hope. The pronouncement of judgment always has a purpose. It clears the ways for the *new thing* that is to come.

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless will sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.”

In a somewhat odd segment of this text, Isaiah includes a bit of historical narrative in the midst of these poetic prophecies. In chapters 36-39, we find a brief story about an encounter between Judah and Assyria, followed by a more personal story from the life of the king of Judah, Hezekiah. What strikes me about this story from Hezekiah's life, though, is how it demonstrates the overall message of the book – like a microcosm of this whole prophecy. Hezekiah falls ill, and in this moment of sickness, the prophet Isaiah is sent to him with the following message from God:

“Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die. You shall not recover.”

Doom! Burning streams of pitch and sulfur. Hezekiah, you have been judged and will be destroyed – there is no way out of this, for the LORD has spoken. But then...

“Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to the LORD. ‘Remember O LORD, I implore you, remember how I have walked before you and done what is good in your sight!’”

“Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: ‘Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will deliver you and this city out of the hands of Assyria.’”

So... either God was wrong about the prediction of Hezekiah's certain death, or the certainty of the pronouncement was somewhat hyperbolic. The message of universal judgment in Isaiah is designed to inspire repentance, a turning back to the truth. The ways of the world are exposed as faulty and inadequate to bring life. The only hope is in returning to the ways of God. **“The grass withers, and the flower fades. But the word of our God will stand forever.”**

With minds and hearts properly re-focused on the Lord of Creation, the Savior of the World, new words of life and hope begin to flow.

“I have chosen you and not cast you off. Do not fear, for I am with you, and do not be afraid, for I am your God... Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth – do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.”

And the people who are now thoroughly chastised and called back to the ways of God are given a new image to guide them. They are told to abandon the leaders of the so-called world powers, who demonstrate self-indulgence, greed, lust for power, and abuse of the weak. This is the system that will fail. Instead, the godly leader, the “true servant,” the proper messiah, is described in this way – the way of God that the faithful are meant to follow:

“Here is my servant, whom I will uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him, and he will bring forth justice to the nations: He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not extinguish. He will faithfully bring justice. He will not faint or be crushed, until he has established justice in the earth. And the coastlands wait for his teaching.”