

group Bible Study – February 14, 2007

Read Isaiah chapters 39-48

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Isaiah 39 ends with an ominous warning from the prophet: the day is coming when your treasure and your children will be carried away to Babylon. With these words, the first part of the book of Isaiah comes to an end.

The gap between chapters 39 and 40 is huge. Most scholars believe that this marks a very important distinction in the book of Isaiah. The thought is that chapters 1-39 were written by Isaiah before the people of Judah were conquered by Babylon. Then beginning in chapter 40 we are reading a different author, writing many years later. This author, the 'second Isaiah,' has a different focus:

"Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry out to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." (Is. 40:1)

Judah has been destroyed. The warnings of the first author Isaiah have been realized. The people have been carried away, and their homeland is only a beautiful memory that makes their current situation all the more bitter. In these new circumstances, the word from the LORD is also new: comfort, peace, and above all – hope.

'Hope' is the critical factor in this week's reading. The people are destroyed. Hope is dead. The future looks like sorrow. And this kind of situation, this hopelessness, sucks the life out of the people of God and makes action impossible. Life takes on the quality of despair.

An important theologian has said that "people do not live merely from traditions; they live from expectations too." It's true that our lives and our actions are determined in part by our history – the story of our lives. But that is not all. Our lives and our actions are also determined by our *expectations* – what we believe about the future, and where we think we're headed. The second Isaiah understands this, and these chapters are designed to give the hopeless people of God a new vision for their future. Once they have grasped a strong vision of what is *coming*, their lives can be energized in new ways to do the work of the One who has called them in the present.

Isaiah's first task is to show the people who their God is. We read that all the inhabitants of the earth are like grasshoppers compared to this God (Is. 40). He holds the nations in his hands (Is. 41). He created the heavens and the earth (Is. 42). The LORD is God, and beside him there is no other. Because of who God is, the promises that God makes can be trusted. In the following chapters, Isaiah makes those promises clear. "Thus says the LORD: do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Is. 43).

Isaiah asks the people to expect great things – to expect a new kind of future that God will bring. For thus says the LORD:

"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." (Is. 43:19)

Study Questions (for individuals or groups):

- How does hope for the future impact the way we live in the present? In what ways does your personal understanding of your future impact what you choose and how you live?
- In Isaiah chapters 39-48, what are some of the specific details of the future that God promises for his people?