

A SUMMARY OF THE MESSAGE OF ISAIAH 1-12

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As we come to the turning point of this class, as far as the message of the book of Isaiah goes, it seems that a written summary of what we have covered in class would benefit us. Also, since we will be virtually skipping over a major chunk of the book (chapters 13-33), I wanted to be able to present the class with something on these chapters. I believe the best way to do this is to give you something you can come back to for your own reading.

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The book of Isaiah opens up with a twelve-chapter section. This opening section sets the pace for the rest of the book. It introduces us to the major characters, themes, and theological ideas, which the rest of the book will pick up on. Like a blooming flower, as each of the sub-sections opens up before the reader, more and more depth is given to each of these major parts of the book. As we have seen, the author of Isaiah revisits many different points in his sermon to us, and it is part of our job as good readers to pick up on both his obvious and subtle points. Five of these major points I will address in the following paragraphs.

Point #1: Judah must prepare for its destruction. The book opens up by placing us within the vision of the prophet Isaiah, who prophesied during the reigns of four kings of Judah (Isa 1.1). The content of the initial twelve chapters, however, places us principally in the reign of king Ahaz (Isa 7). From what we can gather from the book of Kings, Ahaz was a rebellious, unfaithful, and unholy man, who disregarded any form of worship or obedience to Yhwh. Within Isaiah 1-12, his false humility (Isa 7) betrayed the will, not only of the king, but of the people, who trembled before the strength of their enemies (Isa 7.1-2). Yhwh is slow to anger, and he surely abounds in steadfast love; yet, he had spoken of a time when Israel would be punished for her sins (Deut 32). That time had come, and using Isaiah, Yhwh speaks of his reasons for bringing his judgment upon the people. In these opening chapters, Isaiah 2-5 and 10 recount the hardness of the people – a people who fail to acknowledge Yhwh for who he is (2.22), and continually fail to learn from their punishments (4.1). Judah will certainly be punished along with Israel (Isa 8), and they must prepare for their close destruction.

Point #2: Yhwh still reigns in Zion as the Holy One. One of the more intriguing parts of Isaiah 1-12 is its account of when Isaiah received his call to be a prophet (Isa 6). What makes this account so intriguing is that Isaiah himself experiences what the people of Israel so desperately needed to experience: a vision of the glory of Yhwh (6.1ff). Isaiah sees the King enthroned in his temple, with seraphim continually singing of his holiness and glory (6.3). All that Isaiah can say is “Woe is me!” (6.5). From his vision he understands that his lips are unclean, and that he lives within the company of an unclean people: the house of

David. As a representative of the people, Isaiah is cleansed by fire (6.6; c.f. 1.25) and has his sins atoned for, freeing him from guilt (6.7; c.f. 1.18). The prophets' own experience foreshadows what the people will one day go through. For Isaiah, Yhwh is the King, the Lord of Hosts (6.5), and one day the people will have the same vision. That day would come, but at a great cost. It would have to follow on the heels of a great hardness of the house of David through the ministry of Isaiah (6.8-13). Hope remains, but not without much sorrow.

Point #3: Yhwh still has a future for his people in Zion. That hope is bound up in Yhwh's plans for his people in Zion. The opening twelve chapters make it abundantly clear that hope remains for a future Davidic Son to fulfill the promises to David (Isa 9; 11; 12). Yhwh is faithful to his word (9.7), and he will transform the current, desperate state of Zion (1.2-8) into a glorious future (1.26-27) – a future not only for Judah and Israel, but one for all nations who wish to learn from Yhwh (2.1-4). The last word for the people is never one of judgment, but one of redemption and salvation – and Yhwh will bring it about.

Point #4: All hope is centered on Immanuel, the Holy Seed, the Anointed Son of David. Just how Yhwh plans on turning the scarlet sins of the people into white snow is not yet told to us, but what we do know is that the sign of God's continued presence among the people will come in the form a son, who will be named Immanuel (7.14; "God with us"). The will of Yhwh turns on this child (8.10), who owns the land of Palestine (8.8). As mentioned above, certain destruction is coming to Judah, and when it does the people will be lost in great darkness (8.11-22). This son will be a great light within Judah's darkness (9.2-6). He represents the "glorious way" of the latter times (9.1), which contrast and overshadow the "former times" of darkness, represented by king Ahaz and his cohorts. This son will be a Davidic king (9.7), and he will rule an ever-increasing and supremely peaceful kingdom (9.7; c.f. 2.1-4). Unlike Ahaz, he will rule with justice and righteousness, forever (9.7). Moreover, he will be an Anointed King (11.2), who delights in the fear of Yhwh (11.3). The language of Isaiah 11 presents him as the "holy seed" of Isaiah's call (6.13), the "glorious" one of the land (11.10; c.f. 5.2-3). He is the bright future that Israel waits for, the bright future that the whole world needs.

Point #5: Participation in the future of Zion requires faithful obedience to Yhwh. Throughout these opening chapters it is also clear that the Holy Seed, Immanuel, will only be a hopeful future for the remnant of Israel and the nations who are faithful to Yhwh (10.20-27; 11.10-11). The sign of Immanuel is a double-edged sword. The early chapters bear witness that Yhwh wants his people to change (1-5), yet they also preview a bleak future in Israel (6.11-12). Isaiah and his sons become a sign of faithfulness for future generations in Israel (8.11-18), but their witness will go unseen by many (8.19-22). Isaiah 12 closes the opening chapters by giving these faithful few a song to sing while in the midst of darkness. "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation" (12.2). So the faithful sing, so the faithful shout. "Great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel" (12.6).