

Sunday 27th. September 2020
Isaiah 28-35
Part 2. 32-35

We are going to look at the broad themes in this second half of the unit chapters 28-35. The issue all through the book of Isaiah so far has been that of the rebellion and haughty disobedience of the people towards God. Even as they have had a series of Kings, the people have invested their kings with an authority and place that they never should have been given. They were treated and thought of as absolute monarchs. This was never who they were to be. The king was meant to be the Ambassador of the Higher King, of Israel's God, the king was an elevated servant of the True King of Israel who is the Lord.

Instead of this, we find the kings and people embroiled like the other nations in trying to secure themselves by political intrigues and alliances with godless nations. They were behaving not only as if they had no God, but were unfavorably comparing Him with the gods of the surrounding nations and treating Him, and dismissing Him, as powerless and irrelevant.

They did not see that God was being patient with them and sending them prophets to call them back to Himself. The kings and people treated the prophets with the same disrespect and mocked them as babblers whose message was like a broken record. They rejected the prophetic word of God, they did not hear the offers of grace made to them if they would return. The outcome of this was that they sunk deeper and deeper into disobedience and trouble which made a radical cleaning inevitable. They were beyond healing other than God coming in sovereign might and acting alone to save, and this is what is being proclaimed and outworked through the Book of Isaiah.

We have already come across the concept of a holy remnant whom God will keep for Himself and bless and protect, even as He executes judgment on His own nation and those who afflict her. We have already come across the message that God would have a servant who will bring His purposes to light and to effect, and these themes are further developed in coming chapters.

For now, the message of Isaiah has been a strong warning for Judah and Jerusalem not to pin their hopes on Egypt for help against the threat of the Assyrians. The question has ever been one of trusting God or trusting to the peoples own understanding. This is the dilemma, and this has always been the dilemma sinful humanity has faced ever since the doubt was sown in the mind of Eve all those years ago. It still plagues us today. Can God really be trusted, or is He keeping something back from us. I find it very distressing that this is still a question that lies in the undergrowth to spring out and ambush me. Trusting in God does not exclude action on our part. However, trusting in God will probably require a very different response than that shown by the people in Isaiah's day. Repentance is not an easy way to go. It results in us having to face up to unwelcome realities. Trust is not a smooth path, because as in Hezekiah's day it may

result in the world mocking us and pouring scorn and ridicule on such an apparent naive response as trusting in the unseen God!

Chapter 32.

This chapter begins with a further glimpse of light into the coming rule of God, what sort of kingdom He will establish, amongst His people. There is no stating when this is going to happen, but the New Testament still promises a future time when the rule of God, the consummation of the Kingdom will come, and then what has been here in part will become universal and complete. This day is yet to come even as it was in Isaiah's day. However there is severe judgment that is to come before the dawning of that day. For any of you who would understand this 'now but not yet,' nature of the Kingdom, have a look at George Eldon Ladd's book, 'The Gospel of the Kingdom.'

God gives us these visions of the future to encourage us in the days of trial to promise us that they will not last forever. He tells us of these things and promises us these things to keep our eyes on Him and our faith and hope on Him. Sadly, we still tend to depend on our own understandings and ways, and so often we do not see the wood for the trees. There is still a great reluctance to acknowledge that God judges and that it has an effect on our society, economies and agriculture. These are the means that God uses to humiliate us. The correct response when God humiliates a people as He is doing to the nations today, is to humble ourselves before God. This is not yet happening today and most people are looking at the present day events as if they just happen, and that it is all just bad luck, and not the hand of God at work.

Verses 1-8 speaks about the rule which God will establish in the land and amongst His people. A king will rule in righteousness and justice, two things which had been trampled underfoot and were scarce commodities in Jerusalem. Things as they were would not get better, but would get worse, especially under the wretched reign of Manasseh. We will get to him in due course.

This exposition of what is to come reaches its peak for now in chapter 33. 25 which tells us clearly that what Isaiah is telling the people is that God Himself is going to take the reins of the nation back and steer it into the good path.

'For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver,
The Lord is our king, it is he who will save us.'

Ultimately this promised king is Jesus who came and brought salvation to light through the Cross. Even though this was yet many years in the future for the people in Isaiah's day, they were still to look on this as a certain and guaranteed event to come. Because this was so, they could look at it and find help in it for their present day. I suppose that it was a bit like the D day landings in WW2. Once the beach head was made, victory in Europe was a certainty even though the execution of it was long and costly and every inch of ground had, as it were, to be taken, nothing being surrendered without difficulty.

This wonderful promise and vision was given even as the dark clouds over the city of Jerusalem grew yet darker and even when the possibility of survival looked an impossibility.

Verses 9-20 tell us that there is no instant 'being beamed up' from the brink of disaster to this new and coming perfection of government by God and to blessing. To get to this Judah and Jerusalem are going to have to descend into the valley of the shadow of death before they can be ushered up into the mountain of the Lord. Further to this, it is the remnant who will pass through the valley, the rest will perish on the way. It is the remnant will have the promise of Psalm 23 proved to be true. It will be like another Exodus. The disobedient generation will pass away, and the children will inherit the promise.

Isaiah has some hard things to say to the woman of Jerusalem. He is not blaming them for the state of the nation, but they are implicated because they have gone along with the rebellion and disobedience of the men. There was an elite section of woman who had done rather well out of the way the men had led. There was wealth and position, but this was all going to change and even the finest of ladies would become indistinguishable from the poverty stricken woman. Isaiah has said more hard things to the men than to the woman and this is right. What Isaiah complains about is that the demeanor and dress and lifestyle of the woman is a mirror reflection of the pomp and the inflated self-esteem of the people in general. I suppose that it is a bit like the great international conferences on things like global climate and world poverty and hunger. These are often conducted in striking contrasts to the issues being discussed. When leaders fly in with all their advisors at the cost of a huge carbon footprint, it seems counter to facing climate change. When presidents and kings dress for lavish dinners and dress in expensive suits, and the wives turn up in designer dresses and dripping with diamonds, it seems at odds with discussing world hunger and poverty. Bring back the Christian Aid bread and cheese lunches!

The women were here being looked at as a barometer of the general notions of the ruling men. The woman were being inappropriate to the days they were living in. Woman can be such a powerful influence for change. Read about Abigail in David's life. Think about Queen Esther and the survival of the Jewish people. Think of the prominence Jesus gives to Mary who chose the better part. Think of this, that it was mostly women who mourned and were present at the Cross of Christ, the men being scared stiff. It was the women who went to the empty tomb first. Today it is often only a few women who come to pray. Thankfully they do come, I fear to think how worse things would be without the prayers of the women, but where are the men?

The destruction will come and all the finery of the women will be lost, and the pride of the men will be utterly humbled. Those who think they are the international movers and shakers will come to an end of their ideas, all will fail. It will only be by the Spirit of God v15 that the decline and decay will be reversed. This was how it was in Isaiah's day and it is still the same today. The only thing that can change the fortunes of the Church of

Scotland is Revival. In the meantime if you have never prayed before then start, Luke 11, ask, seek, knock for the Holy Spirit. This is the only hope.

I was reading again about the revival in Kilsyth in 1743-43. Today we would have considered the church there a great success. It had a lot of people, they attended church regularly, and they sat through long services and sermons! However they were dead for the most part. The minister, a good man, had worked for 30 years in the parish and had seen little signs of life for all his labours. That was until the Spirit of God fell on the locality and the people. It was like the day of Pentecost in miniature, but the power was the same. It is by the Spirit of God that life comes, not by the plans and programs of man.

There are wide ranging plans being formulated within the Church of Scotland to face the decline in numbers and the need to reduce Churches and ministers. Plans are necessary, but spiritual reformation is crucial. The church in decline is firstly a spiritual issue. We must get our hearts and lives right with God or decline will speed up rather than be reversed. What we need is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Flesh can only give rise to flesh, but Spirit give rise to spirit. This is what God was desiring the people to see in Isaiah's day, and it is what the Lord wants us to see as well. We have the book of Isaiah in the Scriptures to teach us not to behave as the Israelites did, yet year after year we follow the council of the world and become just like the world. We are to be different, a race of Priestly Kings under Christ. Ambassadors of the kingdom of God, not cheer leaders or groupies of the world. We are to learn from the errors of the past, not duplicate them. Seek God for Himself, pray, repent, humble ourselves. Who knows, God may yet turn and heal us and the land.

I have seen many things in my lifetime which began in the Spirit, and then men have tried to can it and sell it as a commodity. Even good and godly things and people have been corrupted by the world, the flesh and the devil and the plan has continued but the Spirit has departed.

At this stage of its history, Jerusalem was running on previous momentum. The Spirit had largely departed but the people did not consider this. Even now, God was reluctant to turn away from His people even though they had turned away from Him. That God had not utterly forsaken His people was not because of need on God's part, but because He loved them, and always would. Here is a blunt statement. By and large, the Spirit has departed from much of the church, and we are running on momentum, but that is rapidly running out and we are coming to a standstill. Don't get me wrong, churches are still busy, but where is the vibrancy of spiritual life? We must return to the Lord with all of our hearts and souls and minds and strength, and put aside our complacency.

Chapter 33.

There is a change of pace and direction here in the first 6 verses. These verses refer to the days of Hezekiah. Sennacherib of Assyria is at the city gates. He has accepted the tribute paid to him by Hezekiah but despite this, he still comes to destroy Jerusalem. It

is as if at the last moment, God intervenes to spare Jerusalem for the present because of Hezekiah's leadership which restored, for a time, the hearts of the people to God. Verses 2 and 14 of chapter 33 show us a repentant people.

Here is a most important lesson. Even at the last moment, repentance can turn events, even if for a little while. Read the account of Jonah and the effects repentance had. There is no guarantee that it will do this every time, because repentance is not something which earns merit, it is the least of our duties. To be low and humble before God even at the best of times is but our duty, and more so when we have provoked the Lord by rebellion and sin. However God shows Himself to be very desirous to bestow grace when He can, even to a people who show a transient repentance. No doubt it was sincere at the time and the lifetime of Hezekiah, but it only delayed the inevitable. Here is the thing though, repentance can change things for a people for a generation. If the generation who followed Hezekiah had repented also, would Jerusalem have continued for longer? Perhaps. However, that did not happen because Hezekiah's son who followed him on the throne was the odious Manasseh who took evil to a newer and more terrible depth, and where the leaders go, the people follow or are dragged.

There are within these chapters many big issues raised about how believers should order their lives. Repentance rises as the first course of treatment for gross rebellion and disobedience. There is an important place given to humble and sincere prayer. If we were not so restricted in what we are permitted to do in church, I would want us to give almost exclusive attention to prayer and humility in faith. The model is 2 Chronicles 7.14, and the Lord's Prayer. However, I suspect that not many people would relish hours of crying out to God. Perhaps this is for two reasons. Firstly we are so unfamiliar with the ways of God in our day. Secondly, we are more like the people of Isaiah's day than we realise. We tend to think in mechanical terms and see things that happen in life as just happenstances and do not see the hand of God in the affairs of humanity. Perhaps there is still a long way to decline before we come to our senses and have our eyes opened to see our utter need of God and the weakness and insufficiency of even our most 'brilliant' designs.

I suspect that if people read this they will say that I am harping on endlessly about the same things. However consider this, what was the continual message of John the Baptist? What was the subject of Jesus preaching? It was 'Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.' There is a direct link between repentance and the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the rule of God being manifest in time and history, it is not the ideas and rule of man being manifested.

Chapters 34 and 35.

These two chapters seem so different, but they present two sides of the one coin. The thread through them both is the return of the King to Zion, God coming in session to rule. There are very heavy theological matters that are at work here which are not stated explicitly, yet are in operation. For example, when the True King takes His place, will He continue to permit the rebellious people to rebel, and the law breakers to break the Law? Of course He will not let the same state of affairs continue. The Lord who has

been so patient that people misinterpreted it as weakness or indifference on His part. God will summon all the rebels and give His terms and judgment, and this is what chapter 34 opens with. God, the Lord of all the earth summons the nations to a reckoning and to face His anger long restrained by His grace.

The second thing that is in operation is this, God who has given the Law to Israel, but which was given for the nations also, will call all to account under this Law. God did not give the Law only to dismiss it later as if it did not matter. The Law was given to direct and rule the people. There were sacrifices to deal with transgression. The Law is firstly a revelation of God's holiness, and God is not going to set His holiness aside as if He was not serious about His holiness and His Law. Even in New Testament times and after the Cross, it was the curse and penalty of the law that Christ dealt with. He gave us His righteousness which is a perfect obedience to the Law of God. The Law stands as a marker to holiness, but without the curse and condemnation which Christ took upon Himself on the Cross. God is serious about His Law, and is entitled to require our account whenever He desires. Isaiah is describing the final summons of God at the end of the world as well as the forerunners of it in time. We do not find these things comfortable subjects, but again let me reiterate that God will take the rubbish out of our hands and hearts before He can fill them with His good things of holiness and pleasures at His right hand.

I remember years ago, the ambulance men heaving me out of the mangled wreckage of the car we were in when struck by a lorry. My arms, chest and legs were damaged and it was very painful. I remember being taken out and the pain of the move, then I remember being in the ambulance with care and pain medication, and the pain of being moved became worth it because we were on our way to getting real help. I look on this as a parable of what is happening here.

Chapter 34

The whole of Chapter 34 depicts the end of times and also reflects the times as we head towards the end. It is poetic language designed to make us 'feel' the woes to come while not laying out the exact contents or order of events. This means that we cannot use these verses to say that present world events correspond to this or that. However, as the rubbish on the Tube rail line gets stirred up when the tube train is approaching the underground station, it is an indication that the train is coming. So it is with the world events, fires, flood, famines, wars, the overthrow of the environment, plagues, locusts, so these are reminders of our mortality, the brevity of our lives, the coming end of the world, and the coming of the eternal kingdom. These should cause us to be prepared, and by this I do not mean building bunkers and storing supplies, but preparation of heart and soul.

Chapter 35

The other side of the coin comes in chapter 35. Please note that these go together, judgment and purging and restoration and the coming of the King. It is better to volunteer to bow our knees and heads and hearts rather than to be made to do so before the bar of the King and Judge. We are promised in Philippians 2.10-11 that every

knee shall bow. I used to say that God would make the nations bow, but in the light of Isaiah 6, I would say that the knees of all will bow when confronted by the Majesty of God! Strong men and rebellious men will wilt before the splendor of the Majesty on High whom they have disregarded and spurned.

In 1994, a strange visitation began in Toronto and spread to many parts of the world. Early reports of people, especially ministers, was that they came into such a sense of the nearness and dearness of Jesus that all strength seemed to leave their bodies and they sank down to the ground like deflated balloons and basked in the presence of Christ. For some this lasted for hours. This was nothing new historically. This was what happened to Isaiah, Daniel and the Apostle John. It happened in revivals in the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th and so on, even in Scotland! It is a sight of the Holy Majesty of God that we need to ask, seek and knock for today. To me this is the Radical Action Plan that should be the very core of the Church of Scotland today. Who knows, perhaps God will yet have mercy on the old Kirk. Even if He does not have mercy, as individuals He can give us mercy and have His renewed and revived people even in the midst of the darkness.

The vision of what the land and nation will experience when the King takes His rightful place as the head and benefactor of a willing and restored people is wonderful. This should be a treat for anyone who likes gardening! The wilderness will blossom. This week we saw pictures from Western Australia of what the desert is like in the Spring. Flowers as far as the eye can see. Here is a vision of everything which is contrary to the effects of wrath and destruction. The bareness is replaced by verdure, aridness is replaced with waters and flowing streams, thirst is replaced by cool waters. The exhaustion of the exile, those who are limping because of the hard journey will have the weariness and the lameness healed and the removed. The picture of v3 is of people who are just done in by the hardship of the journey. We had the family around last week and our grandson came in plain worn out after being asleep in the car. His eyes were half shut, he was walking with wobbly and bendy knees, he was stooped over like a little old man, and his arms hung by his sides. He was hamming it up bigtime, but so cute. It was funny to see this half-awake wee boy.

This was a picture of how the people were after all the fear and anxieties, after the battles and threats, after the captivity of much of the land and the threat of it coming to Jerusalem. Think of the old news reels of the celebrations in the streets of London on VE day. The weary population were dancing, there was celebration, unbridled joy and relief, even though nothing had changed or would change in their material condition for some time to come. In this chapter the desert becomes a garden that blooms. Such will be the kingdom that is coming and is yet to come.

There is in the second half of the chapter, from v8 to the close of the chapter, a spiritual take on affairs. Not only will there be physical restoration, but a whole new spiritual state will present for the people. There will be a holiness which will lift the burden of temptation and sin. It is the chief grief of the Christian that sin still lurks, in plenty, within our hearts. Like lions lurking in the brush, it springs out on the unwary and consumes

us. How many of us have known this, that when we desire to do good, evil is at hand. It was a grief to Paul as he tells us in Romans 7, and it is a grief to sincere believers that we should despise and offend Christ, the One who has done nothing but good to us. It is a grief that we should repay His love by sin and so grieve His heart and wound our own souls.

In this vision, the lions and the fools who influence us for evil will be gone. Sin will not have a place within us then and we will be and know and feel that we are clean. We will be able to look upon Christ without tears in our eyes for all our sin. O to be so clean! The climax of this chapter and the whole of this section of Isaiah comes in verse 10. It has a historical fulfillment in part when God brought the exiles home. It had a further fulfillment in part when Christ gave the gift of the Father promised, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. It has had further partial fulfillments when God has sent revival upon the lands and nations, and it will have its full fulfillment at the end.

The redeemed of the Lord, His redeemed. Redeemed not by their power, but by God's working, they will enter Zion with singing. Until then all our singing is that of song in a strange land. If our singing does not have both great joy in anticipation and sorrow because we are not home yet, then I think that it may not be worship as here depicted. In this lifetime the joy of anticipation and the sorrowful longing for the actualizing go together. If we were to read the older collections of hymns, we would find songs of monumental joy and also of deep sadness and longing. The music of the Christian should be that of rejoicing and sorrowful longings intermingled. Look at the second part of verse 10. It reads like the last part of Psalm 23. This Psalm tells us of goodness and mercy which is for Christians now in this life. Instead of goodness and mercy following us all the days of our lives, gladness and joy will overtake the returning people, and sorrow and sighing will flee away! Listen carefully. Can you hear it coming? Gladness and joy are roaring towards us like the sound and roar of a high speed motorbike accelerating up the hill. On the other hand, sorrow and sighing will flee away just like the darkness which flees as the dawn breaks.

Joy and gladness is coming, just as certainly as darkness flees and cannot remain when the sun rises.

There is an old chorus which I still sing sometimes that begins,

‘There’s a light shining forth,
I can see it on the horizon,’

This has been the bounty of every Christian generation. No matter how dark the days are, no matter how long the darkness increases and lingers, God has His dawn on the horizon. It is part of the Christian inheritance from God to see this hope to come, the certainty of the coming dawn, the seal of the Spirit which is the down payment of our inheritance to come, the guarantee of it. Can you see the light after the darkness? This is what God gave to those who were true to Him even as the clouds darkened over the city of Jerusalem.

Christians are incredible people according to A. W. Tozer. We live as those who have the seed of eternal life in us in the midst of a dying world. We are alive, but ever dying, we are seated in heavenly places even while we live on earth. We are always sorrowful yet rejoice in God. We are blessed as we are poor in spirit, we mourn and hunger and thirst even as we are being filled. We reign now as priests and kings even while the world disregards us. We see the invisible God not with physical eyes, but with the eyes of faith. All of this has ever been true of believers. This is true for believers even in the midst of pandemic and the shadow of death haunting the nations. This is the vision God gave through Isaiah to the people of Jerusalem and it was ultimately this which brought a people back to the land to be ready for the coming of Messiah.

What is our vision today? What are we looking to, expecting, longing for and praying for? If it does not include these things and much more, then we are still blind and deaf and our hearts are hard and numb. This is not a cheese dream or a fantasy, this is the Christian hope that our God will come to us again and deliver us. For a proof of this, let me close with the words of the Lord's Prayer. What is it that Jesus Himself tells us to pray for? He tells us to pray that the Name of the father will be hallowed, that is regarded and treated as holy. It is a prayer that will include the petition that we will, 'live to the praise of His glory.' This means that Christians will live in a way that honours God. That people will look on us and think 'wow, if that's how the kids live, they must have a wonderful Father.' Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, how? As it is in heaven, fully, joyfully, perfectly. Until this all happens, there is still work and prayer to be made.

I wonder how many of this generation will do as we are instructed in Isaiah 62.1 and 62.6-7. God is still there to be sought. God still waits to be gracious, who will rise up and expend and be expended for the coming of the King in His Kingdom. I ask this question firstly of myself. Father, give us aid to lay hold of you. Do not let it be that this nation and church continues to sink because I loved ease more than sweat and tears in prayer and seeking. Ask, seek knock, and the promise is there, God will give the Holy Spirit to such as do this. We may yet see the desert bloom.