

Isaiah 9-10

Do not Fear. God's in Charge

Introduction

“Those who depend upon earth for solutions to the earth’s problems only compound their darkness.” Thus, Oswalt describes the situation at the end of chapter 8. The beginning chapter 9 begins with that situation with the piercing of the gloom with promised light. This brings to a close the final message to Isaiah begun in 8:11. It also concludes the entire “call” section as after 9:7, the text returns to the themes of chapter 5. The rest of chapter 9 and chapter 10 now turn to the wickedness of Ephraim as well as God’s plan to deal with Assyria.

Light Dawns – Vs. 9:1-7

The theme of gloom that ends chapter 8 is continued into chapter 9 where the end to the gloom is pronounced. While Isaiah’s focus is primarily to the southern kingdom of Judah, at times his message extends to the northern kingdom of Israel to encompass all of God’s people. Such is the case here in 9:1. The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali were at the northern most tip of Israel next to the Sea of Galilee. These were the first to fall to the Assyrian invasion and would be the first to see the light dawn of God at some point in the future. It is interesting to note that the area around the sea of Galilee (*Galilee of the nations*) was a melting pot of peoples for much of its history from Isaiah’s day through to the New Testament.

The prose pronouncement of verse 1 is then followed by a song of thanksgiving. It is interesting to note the use of the perfect tense of the verbs to show the certainty of these events describing them as already having taken place when they are yet to come. The song begins with a light suddenly bursting forth on the people searching in the darkness pervading at the end of chapter 8. The poem moves from light piercing the darkness to abundance so that the nation that had been decimated to a remnant is now multiplied and full of joy, the joy of a grand harvest instead of meager pickings and of dividing the spoil of a conquered foe instead of becoming the spoil for the invading armies. In place of fear and darkness is light and joy!

Vs. 4-6 are three “For” clauses that explain what inspires the joy and how it is brought about. In vs. 4, the symbolism of a broken yoke, staff, and rod indicates the end of foreign oppression even as Midian was defeated in the days of Gideon. In vs. 5, they see the end of war with the picture of the burning of the garments of battle – boots and bloody cloaks. Then in vs. 6, the “for” is how this will come about – through a coming person, a child! While never called a king, the designations clearly indicate a royal personage, and a king unlike those of Judah or Assyria or any of the nations. The names seem to ascribe a divine aspect to this person:

Wonderful Counselor – a contrast to the human wisdom derided by Isaiah, whereas God is described as “wondrous in counsel and excellent in wisdom” later in the book (28:29).

Mighty God – a name for God in 10:21

Everlasting father – The book begins with God calling His people, “sons”. Kings did claim “fatherhood” over their people, but the eternal nature is a divine characteristic

Prince of Peace – “Prince” could be the title of an army commander, but this would be one that comes in peace and establishes everlasting peace!

However, the emphasis that this a child born to us reflects his essential humanity. Vs. 7 continues from the child to his kingdom. This child would be of the line of David for he will reign on David’s throne and establish a kingdom of justice and righteousness (also characteristics of the Holy One of Israel). The book gives no further indication of who this could be. To the people of Isaiah’s time, their

expectation would more likely be of a coming king who would address the threats they currently faced. To some extent both Hezekiah and Josiah might be considered to have partially fulfilled this vision. From where we stand in history, we can see the way that this points to Jesus, even if we do not yet see this fully fulfilled ourselves. Our world is hardly at peace. And yet we, along with the people of Isaiah's day, take hope from this passage for what it promises.

The end of verse 7 confirms that while the perfect verb tense has been used until now, this is predictive of the future for "*The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.*" Zeal is a word related to passion and jealousy. It is indicative of how much God loves His people and could not have a disinterested attitude towards them, neither towards their sin nor their suffering.

Woe to Ephraim – Vs. 9:8-10:4

With vs 8, Isaiah suddenly returns to the themes of chapter 5 as if to enclose all of 6:1 to 9:7 as a section describing God's call to Isaiah and examples of how that worked itself out in his message to Ahaz and the peoples of Judah and Israel. However as chapter 5 was focused on the "sour grapes" of the behavior of the people of Judah, this section speaks to the inhabitants of *Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria*. This section is carefully structured with four stanzas. The first three end with a refrain of the outstretched hand of God in judgment. The last stanza then has the final "woe" to communicate to the people.

The first stanza (vs. 8-12) addresses the arrogance and self-sufficient attitude of the people. It begins with the *message* (literally "word") of the LORD going out *against* Jacob. When the LORD speaks, it is not just words, but what is spoken is produced or comes to pass (even as the LORD spoke creation into existence). It is sent to *Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria* (rather than to *Judah and Jerusalem*) who speak with *pride and arrogance of heart*. Vs. 10 brilliantly describes their attitude in two parallel phrases. In the face of disaster and God's judgment, rather than turning to God, they look to themselves to try and transform it into an opportunity. In the first saying, they say they will replace the tumbled mud bricks with *dressed stones*. Then they will replace the cut down sycamore fig trees, with regal and valuable cedars. But the LORD thwarts their plans by raising up even more antagonists against them.

The second stanza affirms that they still refuse to turn to or listen to God. And so He will suddenly (*in one day*) remove their leaders – described as the *head and tail, palm branch and reed* to encompass all the leadership "from the most honored, the waving palm, to the most humble, the bowing rush"¹. The head/tail metaphor is explained in verse 15 with the elder and honored man as the head, and perhaps with some contempt for his prophetic competitors, describes the false prophets as the wagging tail. The result is that the entire society has been led astray has now become corrupt from the strong and capable young men to even the orphans and widows, *for everyone is ungodly and wicked, every mouth speaks folly*. And yet His hand is still upraised against them.

The third stanza now describes the burning of two fires. One is the fire of wickedness and the other is the burning wrath of God. The stanza flows between the two fires as if to say that they fuel each other. God's burning wrath leaves them to their sin. Their sin seems to feed a lust for greater lawlessness and a hunger that cannot be satisfied. It comes to the point that they turn against each other, even brother against brother (Manasseh and Ephraim and then Judah).

And so we come to the seventh woe (if continued from chapter 5). The warning is to those who enact laws that cause the oppression of the helpless for their own enrichment. The poor and vulnerable are denied justice. It is not a matter of if the LORD appears, but when. The rhetorical question is what will they do when judgment comes? What will happen to all the ill-gotten gains then? There will be no

¹ Oswalt, John N. – The Book of Isaiah. Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986, Page 255

protection for them. They will be the same as any other captive or victim. This stanza then ends as all the others with the continued outstretched hand of God's wrath. Where will it turn next?

Assyria – Vs. 10:5-34

Judah need not fear Ephraim, but that does not address the even larger threat of Assyria. However, Isaiah now turns from the “woes” to Judah and Ephraim to deliver one more to Assyria as God's outstretched arm of wrath turns in that direction. Vs. 5 and 6 reveal that Assyria is an instrument (*rod/club*) of God's anger against a godless and wicked nation, His own people. However, even if Assyria is such a tool, the heart attitude of Assyria is still one of arrogance, greed and wickedness as seen in vs. 7-11. Vs. 7 shows a heart of aggression and destruction. Vs. 8-9 show the pride of the heart of the king of Assyria as his commanders have taken more and more territory. In vs. 10-11, he has no regard for the God of Judah but simply assumes he is not as powerful as the idols that have already been conquered.

Verse 12 breaks into the poem to reassert that regardless of the opinion of the king of Assyria, God is the one in control, that He has a plan that He will accomplish and then will judge Assyria for its arrogant attitude described in vs. 13-14. Assyria seems to be making godlike claims in boasting of its strength, ability to move boundaries, or its right to plunder whatever it finds, as if it were a nest of abandoned eggs. In vs. 15-19, God will enlighten Assyria that it is just a tool in God's hands, that it could do nothing without His will and power. Isaiah uses a mixed metaphor of disease and fire to illustrate the coming judgment. All health, vigor and glory will be eaten away by disease or fire and it will be left as a wasted, burned out hulk.

Focus shifts abruptly in vs. 20-27 to Judah, for if Assyria comes under God's wrath and the threat ends, then what does that mean for Judah and the remnant of Israel? Vs. 20-23 first deal with a purified remnant that has learned to lean on God alone will return. And yet it is not a fully positive experience. They may have thought that the promise to Abraham to be as populous as the sand of the sea, was something they could rely on for protection from judgment in light of their faithlessness. But that was not the case. Vs. 24-27 focus on the oppression of Assyria (vs. the remnant). This is a wholly positive message that they need not fear. For God's anger would subside and then He would deliver them even as He delivered them from Midian via Gideon and delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

The chapter ends with a poetic image of the Assyrian army descending on Jerusalem. This is neither historical nor prophetic but rather an image to convey the nature of the coming threat. The scene begins 15 miles north of Jerusalem and tracks the army coming south – not along the main road where more strongholds would need to be overcome, but along the Jordon Rift. The terrain is difficult and so they leave their baggage in Michmash and cross to Geba and set up camp with no more barriers to Jerusalem. This strikes fear into all the surrounding towns and the villages that lie in the juggernaut's path. However, vs. 33-34 bring a dramatic change. For the LORD of Hosts will now act. The short, terse phrases of the approaching army are replaced with longer cadences as the great tree is hewn down by the power of the LORD. So regardless of what we face, what we fear, what situations we face, the LORD, our God, is sovereign over it all. It is Him we should fear.