

We have reflected on the New Testament letter, Ephesians, since the beginning of April. Starting today, I want to introduce you to a very different part of the Bible for the next seven weeks. The Apostle Paul wrote letters to congregations. Isaiah was a prophet, who wrote his messages, and we don't always know who the intended audience was. Reading what those men wrote offers two very different experiences. I want you to read Isaiah, so I need to help you know what you are letting yourself in for.

### **Characteristics of *Isaiah*, the Book**

Reading Ephesians is like reading a long letter or a short story. It has a clear beginning, it develops certain themes, and it comes to an orderly conclusion. Isaiah is not like that at all. It is a collection of short speeches and brief memoirs from Isaiah's career. You can finish reading one of his speeches, and the next thing you read has nothing to do with that speech.

It's like reading someone's diary. The entry for December 14 may be very interesting, but the entry for December 15 may be completely unrelated. Each entry is interesting, and reading them all is not a problem, when you remember that entries in a diary are not meant to tell a consecutive story. Isaiah is like that.

Second, Isaiah is long. In the NIV Isaiah is 108 pages long. By comparison Ephesians is 6 pages long. Even seasoned readers don't tackle it all at once. It is one of the 16 most important books in the Bible that every Christian should dig into at least once in a lifetime. It was the gospel to the first Christians, because its language helped them to understand Jesus Christ better than any other Old Testament writing with the possible exception of The Psalms.

Third, Isaiah is heavy. Sometimes, it's heavy because it's dark. Isaiah lived in tumultuous times. He saw half his country overrun and destroyed by invading armies, and the other half came within a whisker of having the same fate. He also saw injustice on a frightening scale in his half the country that was not destroyed. He was not silent. He spoke hard words to unholy bureaucrats. He spoke hard words about the nations that hounded his people, Israel. He did not mince words, and his words were heavy. They were dark, foreboding.

But Isaiah is heavy in another way. It's heavy because it's good. I remember seeing the Mendenhall Glacier in the Alps. On one side, as it begins to melt, it feeds the Rhine, which flows to the North Sea. On the other side, as it begins to melt, it feeds the Rhone, which flows to the Mediterranean. It takes your breath away. It's good heavy. Isaiah has passages that have that effect on you. And you want more. They slip past our biases, our banality, and all our defenses, and they waken longings in us, which we have never had before.

Fourth, Isaiah sings. This is part of its goodness. There are passages of lyric beauty that are better than what I find in many of our most celebrated works of modern music, literature, poetry, and visual arts. The best measure of Isaiah's singing is how many of his words have found their way into great works of music.

### **Characteristics of *Isaiah*, the Man**

We know more about what Isaiah wrote than we know about Isaiah the man. He seldom referred to himself. We have to read between the lines to find the man in the

written collection he left behind. In this respect he is different from the prophet, Jeremiah, who bled all over the page with emotion. But here and there Isaiah peeps out.

Let's look at the most famous self-revelation in his writings, Isaiah 6. This chapter, very short, discloses his call from God to be a prophet. Here is Isaiah in his own words in verses 1-4. **In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.**

No one can be the same after such an experience. No one can have such an experience without reconsidering the whole meaning of his life. Isaiah's immediate response may seem counterintuitive. Verse 5: **"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."** I hope that somewhere in your life you have had the experience of receiving something so good that you felt unworthy of it. That you should exist and be permitted to have something that good overwhelms you with a sense of "Why me? Who am I that I should have this?"

I have an idea that more people than we suspect have had such experiences of God. They aren't sure what it means. They can't explain it. They often don't want to talk about it. The mystery of Being drew back the curtain for an instant, and it floored them. Feelings of unworthiness came over them in waves, sometimes as intense as Isaiah's.

Isaiah did not exactly explain what happened to him, but he told us what happened next in verses 6-7: **Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken from the tongs of the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."** The purging fires of God can do that.

Isaiah wrote next that his cleansing served a large purpose. Verse 8: **Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"** The overwhelming sense of unworthiness in the presence of God and the purifying act of forgiveness prepared Isaiah for his life's work.

And what a work! Verses 9-10: **He said, "Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."** I told you Isaiah could be heavy and hard.

The presence of prophets means that matters have reached the tipping point. Verses 11-13: **Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?" And he answered: "Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged. Until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste."**

Then, like a lily on a stagnant pond, like a crocus eruption in springtime, hope rises in the last lines of verse 13: **But as the terebinth (a kind of tree) and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."** The

**holy seed!** The ruin to come does not have the last word. God will preserve a **holy seed**, and like all seeds, it promises a future; and a holy seed promises a future marked by righteousness and justice.

These 13 verses define the man, and they define his message. They tell us why Isaiah is both hard and good and why it sings. They tell us why Isaiah so often writes of some golden age to come. They tell us what separates Isaiah's voice from the voices that lament the darkness that so many believe is overtaking our age.

### **In the Last Days**

I'd like to illustrate that last point with some comic relief. P. J. O'Rourke is a writer, and sometimes he writes biting satire. He did that in a recent essay in the *Wall Street Journal* (<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304011304579220174176053820>, accessed December 7, 2013) entitled "The Boomer Bust." He said of himself and more than 75 million other Baby Boomers, "We are the generation that changed everything," and he proceeds to detail with savage insight what it changed and how it changed it.

Here's how he concluded his assessment of Baby Boomers: "There is no escape from happiness, attention, affection, freedom, irresponsibility, money, peace, opportunity and finding out that everything you were ever told is wrong. Behold the baby boom, ye mighty, and despair."

It's all very witty and engaging. He almost makes you feel good, until you realize he just said the view of the world you've held for the last 50 years was all wrong. And hearing that with the words of Isaiah echoing in memory and conscience, you realize that Mr. O'Rourke puts out no call for repentance and amendment of life; he refuses to speculate on the possible consequences of being wrong; and he offers no vision of a better world to come. He represents the voices that fill mass media today.

It is much more difficult at first to read Isaiah than it is to read Mr. O'Rourke. But Isaiah deserves a serious hearing in our time, because he is simply more relevant. One example of that is his vision of a golden age to come. Let's look at two examples.

Isaiah 2:2 opens this way: **In the last days.** For Isaiah the last days were far off in some dim and distant future. For the New Testament writers the last days had already begun with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The last days are the times in which Jesus is patiently exerting His authority to govern the nations, and His authority will be contested in every way imaginable until He governs the world unchallenged.

Isaiah gives us a vision of what Christ is laboring to bring about in verse 3: **Many people will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."** That vision inspires congregations like this one to do all in their power to teach the ways of God and exhort their people to walk in His paths. Verse 4 makes clear what is at stake in learning the ways of the Lord and walking in His paths.

**He (the Lord) will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords in plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.** If you were a Baby Boomer, who stuck a flower in the muzzle of a soldier's rifle, you may have been naïve, but your heart was in the right place. It's just that apart from the God of Jacob and Jesus, such peace is a fantasy.

Here's a second example of Isaiah's vision of a golden age. Isaiah 9:5 picks up the theme of peace: **Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.** Yes! Yes! We all want it, none more than the warrior. But this time Isaiah linked the coming, golden age of peace to a man, a most unique man.

Verses 6-7: **For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.**

Where on any throne, in any Oval Office, over any Politburo did ever such a man preside? Isaiah saw no such man occupying or waiting in the wings to occupy the seat of King David. Memories of David's greatness fed hopes of a greater David – hopes fanned again to flame 700 years hence, when David's greatest Son declared the Kingdom of God in the Temple Courts.

Fouad Ajami, a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution of recently wrote the following: "The current troubles of the Obama presidency can be read back into its beginnings. Rule by personal charisma has met its proper fate. The spell has been broken, and the magician stands exposed. We need no pollsters to tell us of the loss of faith in Mr. Obama's policies – and, more significantly, in the man himself. Charisma is like that. Crowds come together and they project their needs onto an imagined redeemer."

(<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304243904579196440800552408>, accessed December 9, 2013)

This is no cause to rejoice. It is the shattering of hope for millions of Americans. It is iron evidence that we have forgotten the ancient, guiding wisdom of the Bible: **It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.** Mr. Ajami's word "redeemer" is most telling. That's what we are looking for, but he is not to be found among the men who rule nations.

### Take Away

Let us pray for the President. He is not a redeemer. He is a man with feet of clay and with responsibilities greater than any man can bear, and with perhaps an insufficient humility for the task. Perhaps the miseries of the Affordable Care Act will in the providence of God waken humility in him.

As we make our way through the stores of capitalist America and hear the increasingly banal and vapid music that softens us up to buy, let us think about Isaiah's **Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace**, and call to mind the Redeemer whose birth we celebrate and be at peace.