Isaiah Introduction Part 2

Chapters 1 – 39

- Isaiah's message, as we pointed out in Part 1, was against 4 false beliefs:
  1) that God would protect and bless Judah despite its lack of faithfulness
  2) that ritual and sacrifice were all that God required
  3) that "the day of the Lord" would be a triumph for Judah
  4) that Jerusalem will always be protected
- Isaiah accomplishes this message by dividing the book up into 3 sections: Chapters 1-39, 40-55, 56-66

Chapters 1-39

- Here we meet Isaiah, the son of Amoz. He begins immediately with a very strong challenge to the King of Judah and his people. His rigid demands hit so hard that Sheldon H. Blank, author of "Prophetic Faith in Isaiah", wrote that, "If hear him you grow confused because he upsets your notions, if you go with him you run into trouble because you are pushing against the crowd, if you deny him, you feel guilty because you know he is right".
- There is no underestimation of the value of Chapter 6 to the whole book. Here is where Isaiah receives his calling and it is here that he experiences a new understanding of God's holiness. Previously people had thought of holiness in terms of being "set aside". Holy water, holy bread, holy wine holy cups or bowls are things that are literally set aside for worship and for nothing else. So as people thought about God and His holiness, it was that He was separated from humanity, high above and exalted. In that moment in the Temple when he encounters the seraphim, it is not the gap between he as a creature and God as Creator that strikes him, but it is that he knows himself for his sinfulness. He is terrified as he cries out in 6:5, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." It is the moral gap between he and God that hits him, the gap between one who is a sinner and the One who is pure. Here holiness acquires a moral significance at its core that had never been known before. So thereafter Isaiah's most common reference to God was "The Holy One of Israel".
- Suddenly Isaiah saw everything clearly. He saw the sinful pride of the nation, the selfishness that permeated society, the cold indifference and to the poor and the injustice that went with it. And he saw the impotence of Judah's ritual worship and the reliance on sacrifice that to his mind only made everything worse.

- Thus Isaiah preached that God's judgement was coming and that it would come in the form of Assyrian armies. He could say this because he came to see that all of history, not just that of the Hebrews, was in the hands of God. He makes this case in Chapter 10 where, as the Assyrian crisis comes to Judah, he put forward the idea that even the powerful Assyrian empire could be just a mere instrument of God's plan and that as soon as God had finished using the Assyrians to bring punishment and judgement on Judah, they too would be punished for their pride, their "atheism of force" as one commentator put it.
- Of all the early Hebrew prophets, Isaiah was the first to make faith in God as a core element in Judaism. The German Old Testament scholar, Claus Westermann, argues that it was Isaiah who first developed the biblical concept of faith as we know it. God and God alone was the answer to every question. As the Assyrian crisis grew, he counseled against faith in military might or diplomacy or international alliances. Faith in God alone was the only route forward. Anything else would only lead to frustration and defeat. Faith in anything other than God was apostacy.
- The last two parts of Isaiah's message in this first section are his doctrine of the remnant and his absolute certainty in the coming of the Messiah. As he looked around Isaiah could only see a few who were truly faithful to God and he believed that somehow a remnant who were these faithful ones would survive the coming judgement. And as he looked at the failure of Judah's king and leaders, he realized that only the Messiah, a righteous servant of God, would bring an answer to the Hebrews' failures. Here he spoke of the Messiah's birth (7:14), His ascension to the throne (9:2-7) and His righteous rule (11:1-9). This Messiah would not be for the nation only but would be a personal Messiah, to reach the hearts of everyone. Because of the Messiah, one day there would be no more war, and an ideal world of righteousness and peace would prevail.
- But just as Joseph foresaw the Exodus but never imagined it would take over 400 years, Isaiah never imagined it would take 700 years for his prophecy of the birth of the Messiah to come true.