Isaiah Introduction Part 4 Chapters 56 – 66

After the Storm

- In the final chapters we find that the Kingdom of Judah has weathered the storm and life is returning to normal after the crisis. And if we ourselves look back to the days in 2001 just after the crisis of 9/11 we can get something of an idea of what Isaiah was contending with as he dealt with the hearts, minds, and attitudes of the people.
- The first Sunday after 9/11 the churches in America were packed. People who hadn't been to church in years, or who had never stepped foot inside a church were suddenly filling the pews. But the next Sunday there were fewer and after a few weeks, churches were back to the familiar faces only. This is the same attitude Isaiah was dealing with after the threat was over. He focuses much of his preaching on the need for worship, turning to God not just when you're scared, but making the adoration of God a part of your daily life. Isaiah condemned idolatry, which had seeped into the kingdom as the king sought to appease Judah's pagan enemies. Isaiah preached that the people should be mindful of the 10 Commandments and especially remember the 4th, to keep the Sabbath Day holy. As to prayer, Isaiah pushed hard for the people to rely on prayer and the power it brings rather than relying on their own resources and strength (56:7).
- What Isaiah does not do is support the idea of ritual for ritual's sake. In our own time a great many people have the idea that by simply attending church as a weekly ritual they are saved. But someone once pointed out that simply sitting in church does not make you a Christian any more than sitting in a garage makes you a car. He strongly condemns the practice of ritual worship that is disconnected from righteous living. In 58:1-12 for example, he condemns the practice of using fasting as a substitute for social justice. He speaks against the unrighteous practices and services of the Temple that exclude faithful people from participating in worship, even going as far in 66:18-21 as suggesting that foreigners who are faithful and righteous believers should be allowed to serve as Levites and Priests.

The Heart of a Pastor

- The final chapters show the depth of the prophet's pastoral heart. It is in 61:1-3 that we find the famous passage quoted by Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth. "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners. To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of our God. To comfort all who mourn. To grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified."
- In 58:6-7 he shows his concern for the oppressed in Judah and in 56:6-8 speaks in defense of the rights of foreigners. Between 63:15-64:12 the prophet prays passionately for all the Hebrew people in both kingdoms.
- Sin and judgement are topics rarely mention in the middle chapters of 40-55, but here in the closing they are very prominent. Someone once asked a large gathering of preachers if they only had one sermon to preach, what would it be? For Isaiah as he coming to the end of his time as the prophet of God to Judah he is clear. Judgement is coming. It will be a day where a new heaven and a new earth are given by God (65:17-21). This judgement will be a righteous judgement with the wicked of the Hebrews punished and the righteous spared (65:13-25; 66:22-24). Long before the Revelation to John, the prophet speaks of an eternal damnation (66:24). So vivid of a picture of divine judgement is painted here that for centuries the rabbis repeated 66:23 after 66:24 so as to not frighten their congregations.
- One of the criticisms we hear from cynics is that scriptures that are 2000 years old at best cannot be trusted. But two copies of Isaiah were found in the Dead Sea scrolls and in comparison to modern texts there were found only 13 minor differences in spelling and none of them changed the meaning of a word. At least by Jesus' time the 700-year-old text of Isaiah was the very same as we have today, 2700 years later.