

Followers of the Way Do not be led astray

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Isaiah 26: 1 - 21

The prophecy in Isaiah from our reading today comes after a long series of oracles or judgments pronounced against the nations, calling them to account. It's part of an end-time scenario, and it's not pretty. Ch 24:3 'The earth will be completely laid waste and totally plundered. The Lord has spoken....' And a little further on, 'In that day the Lord will punish the powers in the heavens above and the kings on the earth below.'

What do we know about Isaiah? Well, we know for definite that he was based in Judah and, according to chapter 1, he was active in the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, which would have made his ministry span around 64 years. Now of course there are a lot of textual and contextual problems surrounding Isaiah, not least exactly how many prophets are included in the text - but though that's undeniably fascinating, I don't want to get bogged down in that this morning. Instead, I want to look at the overview of the message in the chapters leading up to and including chapter 26.

First off, it's clear that Judah, the southern kingdom, has sinned 'big-time'. Chapter 2 says that the people have abandoned/forsaken the ways of the Lord. Instead, the land is full of diviners and soothsayers, of foreign cults, and they're materialistic and corrupt, 'clasping hands with foreigners'. The land is also filled with chariots, horses - all the latest technology, which undermine the people's reliance on God. You get the picture, I'm sure. And because of their faithlessness, the people have brought themselves under judgment. Isaiah warns them their sin is so great that the Lord is going to use foreign aggressors to discipline them. But there's nevertheless some good news, he says, because after the disciplining God will move against their oppressors, and He'll smash them entirely, before restoring Israel's fortunes.

We see God's power and protection actually played out in 2 Kings 19, which describes the Assyrian invasion of Judah under Sennacherib, when Hezekiah is king. The Assyrians come and lay siege to Jerusalem, and at that point things are looking pretty bleak, so Hezekiah does what he ought to have done first off. He puts on sackcloth and ashes and goes to Isaiah and says, 'What shall we do?' And in response Isaiah says, 'Nothing,' just trust in the Lord. He's heard, and He's going to make this mighty army go away.

And that's exactly what happens. According to 2 Kings 19:35, during the night the angel of the Lord visits the Assyrian camp and slays 185,000 warriors, leaving only dead bodies. After that the siege is off, and Sennacherib turns tail and heads for home. May such deliverance be given to Ukraine today.

But how does all of this relate to us? Does it relate to us? Well, reading the early chapters of Isaiah, first off we might indeed think there are clear parallels to the world

today. Corruption, sexual licence, families falling apart, society's 'worship' of materialism and greed, of 'Self' ... and now the growing fear of war. So what might God be saying to us?

Well, as with Isaiah's message to the people of Judah, I think He's calling us to repent. If nothing else, I think it's clear that, as result of our sin, God is 'shaking' the nations. Just as Isaiah warned the people of Judah He was going to do to them. We live in very different times, of course, but the events we see unfolding now have the same potential for disaster that they did back then. It's beyond doubt that across the world, and most definitely here in the UK, we've rebelled against God and that we need to be purified. But it's also beyond doubt that God is in control, and He can intervene and stop all that's happening – even now – if we ask Him. More importantly, God wants to help. His will is to save, not destroy ... but He will only intervene if and when we repent. Because good and evil cannot co-exist, and we can only serve one master – so we have to choose.

And that brings me on to chapters 25 and 26, and the reading we've had this morning, because suddenly here the tone changes, and instead of all the dire predictions of destruction and terror, we have instead a song of thanksgiving – a song that looks forward to a time when the powers hostile to God will be totally destroyed – annihilated – and the time of salvation will begin. Chapter 26:1-2 'We have a strong city; God makes salvation its walls and ramparts. Open the gates that the righteous nation may enter, the nation that keeps faith.'

But it's a bit more layered than at first sight appears, because, counterpointed against this, we find a community in what feels to be almost baffled distress.

There is first the acknowledgment that what they're going through is a visitation and chastening by Yahweh – who, the text makes clear, stands above all the turmoil and distress, and can, if He wants, stop it. Faced with that knowledge, the people recognise their absolute inability to help themselves. V.17 'As a pregnant woman about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain, so were we in your presence, Lord. We were with child, we writhed in labour ... but we gave birth to wind.' They are forced to admit that despite all their best efforts, 'We have not brought salvation to the earth, and the people of the world have not come to life.'

Now don't forget, this is a community of believers – the children of Israel, specially chosen by God – but now, faced with disaster, they're forced to admit that, by themselves, they're absolutely useless.

There's so much for us here today. We are in a world caught by sin. Even though it sounds a bit dramatic, it's no exaggeration to say that there's a spiritual battle going on for the soul of the world. A battle between God and the devil – but we need to understand is that, by our choices and actions, we've allowed the devil to grow strong. We've fed his control over the last hundred or so years, by the worship we've given to things such as sexual licence, greed, consumerism... the killing of the unborn ... the list goes on and on. The truth is, we've turned away from God and that has fed the power of evil. And we've compounded the problem by saying that we can manage for ourselves. This resurgence in the power of evil in the last days, ahead of Christ's return, is of course foretold in Scripture. How far ahead that return might be, as I've said before, I've

no idea – but I do know that God is moving to reassert control, and that only repentance can deliver us from the chaos and strife ... the violence ... now dominating the world.

It is urgent that men and women repent. That we acknowledge Christ as Lord and seek to live pure and godly lives, obedient to God's Word as set down in Scripture, and respecting, valuing and caring for one another as made in the image of God.

As believers, our call is to carry God's light out into the darkness, to defend truth, and seek after the lost. But to do this, we have to stay very close to God. He has to be not just the centre, but the author, of all we do. We serve a God of power, and that power is promised to us. But only as we are conformed to Christ ... aligned to God's will.

Make no mistake, the devil will try every which way he can to distract, divert, and separate us from God. It's that alignment that Satan fears more than anything else! Because it's in the stillness of God's presence that we're empowered, and that we become channels for God's power, so that the Spirit can work through us.

That's what the devil wants to stop – this outworking and manifestation of God's will. And some of the lures he holds out will without doubt seem extremely 'good', noble even. Covid and the debate around vaccines, for instance, is a good example here. There's been so much controversy over whether or not the virus is real, or just a conspiracy to bring in the new world order. Similarly, with the vaccines, with some Christians absolutely convinced they're the mark of the beast and evil, while others say they're a gift from God - imperfect maybe, but a real help, and therefore good.

I'm not going to venture an opinion here, because the point is, the arguments have become a real point of division, sometimes with real anger against those who don't share our views. Christians **will** always hold differing views on just about every subject under the sun, and that's fine! Before and with God, they're absolutely entitled to make their own decisions – but when we get drawn into debate, as we've seen in the last weeks, there's a real danger we get diverted from God ... and the body of Christ becomes divided. Victory for the devil!

We mustn't allow that to happen.

I suspect the days ahead are going to be both challenging and dangerous, but don't allow your thoughts to be taken captive by the chaos – whether that manifests as anger, fear, judgmentalism ... whatever. And that doesn't mean that we don't exercise judgment, by the way, but don't allow what's happening to divert us away from God.

Know that He is in control and that, whatever happens, He will not let us fall. He's working to a bigger plan - for our salvation. So like a child, be calm and trust. We are soldiers of Christ, so come under the shadow of God's wing and be still. Dwell in His presence, so that when the time comes to act we may be ready ... led by, and filled with, His power.

