
Day 190 - July 9

Judah after Israel's Fall (725-585 BCE) *Isaiah Warns about Egypt and Ethiopia*

Readings: *Isaiah 18:1-7; 19:1-25; 20:1-6; 30:1-33; 31:1-9*

Reflections:

- The threat of an Assyrian conquest causes Israel not to reach out to God but as we have come to expect, human sources of salvation. This time they will be looking to Egypt, ruled by the Cushites from Ethiopia, with their many horses and chariots. In delivering this warning of judgment, Isaiah goes undressed for three years (he may or may not have had a small cloth when he stripped his outer robe. Let's hope he did.) No doubt this is an act to bring great shame on the nation. Ashod, a Philistine city will be attacked in 711 BCE by Sargon and the Lord uses this to give greater explanation of why Isaiah has been stripped. These prophecies of Isaiah are apparently powerful and far reaching as 10 years later one of Assyria's commanders, Sennacherib, will actually quote Isaiah's words when he ridicules Judah for their trust in God (a bit of an overstatement) and their reliance on Egypt. Isaiah and this commander agree on Egypt being a false hope and time will prove them both correct as Egypt under Pharaoh Neco II will become Israel's adversaries.
- This first judgment against Cush follows the pattern we have witnessed. God's power, his use of creation as an instrument of judgment, and ultimate destiny of the nations who are enemies of Israel ultimately bringing gifts of worship to Mount Zion.
- The prophecy against Egypt gives another insight into how God's judgment works: "I will stir up Egyptian against Egyptian – brother will fight against brother, neighbor against neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom. The Egyptians will lose heart and I will bring their plans to nothing." At times God brings judgment not by raising up an enemy but moving those who are destructive to turn on themselves and destroy themselves. This self-destruction is maybe the ultimate judgment as people "reap what they sow." The judgment continues against Egypt: military enemies and natural disasters. Another interesting judgment falls against their wise men: "a spirit of dizziness" that turns them into fools. Again we see God's judgment is holistic.
- Right in the middle of these terrible predictions of judgment we are confronted with an incredible passage of enemy love and grace for the Egyptians. The Egyptians were the

symbol of the ancient enemy of Israel as they were the nation that had held them in slavery. Isaiah 19:19-22 outlines an incredible picture of the Egyptians becoming passionate worshippers of God: "In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the heart of Egypt, and a monument to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and witness to the Lord Almighty in the land of Egypt. When they cry out to the Lord because of their oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and he will rescue them. So the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the Lord. They will worship with sacrifices and grain offerings; they will make vows to the Lord and keep them. The Lord will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the Lord, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them." Imagine how shocking these words would be to Israel. Their great enemy will be one day fully redeemed by God and a recipient of radical grace? They will know God and will worship him. Once again we see God plant a seed of truth for the coming kingdom and the Messiah who will teach the world a message of enemy love.

- The shocking message continues with Isaiah 19:23-25 - "In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.'" God will then use the great enemy of Israel to bring grace to all the enemies of Israel. What is fascinating about this prophecy is that through Israel's great enemy of Jesus day, the Roman Empire, God would be part of how God brought his message of grace to the entire known world. It would be the Roman roads, the Greek language, and the shared culture of the Roman Empire that would open the way for the message of Jesus to spread across the known world, even reaching Egypt! Some researchers indicate that by 250 CD, upwards of 10% of Egypt were committed Christ-followers.
- In Isaiah 20:1-6 we read the explanation of why God commanded Isaiah to go naked for three years as a sign. First, who would want to be a prophet if this was one of the possible outcomes? Talk about a lousy job. Second, why three years? You would think that three days would do the trick to get the message across. God can take longer than we want! Isaiah experienced that in a pretty intense way. Third, we see again that God cares nothing about social sensitivities. God uses a naked man as his main messenger. Imagine the good Jewish parents trying to respond to their kids. "Look daddy, there is that preacher. Why is he naked all the time?" Yep, a bit hard to explain that one!
- In Isaiah 30:1,2 we see another insight into human independence. "'Woe to the obstinate children,' declares the Lord, 'to those who carry out plans that are not mine, forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit, heaping sin upon sin.'" This is so common to the human heart. We love to do our own thing like stubborn kids. We do our own thing and make plans and commitments without seeking God's leadership. We get ourselves

into commitments that are not grounded in God's leadership. Our sin mounts up and things just get more and more complicated. Israel is here again an example to us of everything that doesn't work! May God give us the faith to wait for him to establish those plans and committed relationship that are grounded in his Spirit's leading.

- When we rebel against God and do our own thing, then we really don't want to hear what God has to say. We don't want people to confront us with God's word or his will for us. We are like spiritual ostriches that stick our heads in the sand and hope our problems (and God) goes away. "Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophecy illusions....stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel."
- Isaiah 30:15 gives all God seekers and Christ-followers a powerful insight into a vibrant relationship with God: "In repentance (turning from sin and self-centeredness) and rest (turning from striving and self-effort) is your salvation, in quietness (stilled dependence) and trust (unshakable faith) is your strength (his power at work in our weakness)." It is God's spiritual math! $R + R = \text{Salvation}$, $Q + T = \text{Strength}$. If we feel broken and stuck, God tells us what to do. Turn away from all our junk and humbly rest in his presence. He will do the rest. If we feel weak and powerless? Remain still before God and trust him completely. His power will carry the day even in our greatest weakness. May God help us to embrace it all! Yet, in the ongoing story of Israel, the saga of what doesn't work, we see the typical response: "But you would have none of it!" All of their striving only leads to more striving. Their fears only multiply as they try to save themselves and all their attempts to save themselves leaves them isolated and alone ("like a flagstaff on a mountaintop"). I guess there is a simple lesson here: When you are afraid and struggling and in the deepest trouble, you should run! Run to God and nowhere else!