

Judah after Israel's Fall (725-585 BCE)

Isaiah's Prophecies about Restoration and the Messiah

Readings: *Isaiah 40:1-31, 41:1-10*

Reflections:

- As the people of Judah have already been enslaved and taken away in captivity and the southern tribes of Israel are lost in pagan idolatry under Manasseh, Isaiah speaks out words of comfort, promise and hope. He speaks of the restoration God will bring through an anointed king, a Messiah. Even when it seems the darkest, God remains faithful to this desperate and defeated little nation. God through Isaiah reminds them of his unchanging purposes to bring salvation and restoration to this broken world.
- "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." In time when all you have is religion, rules and punishment if you fail, these words would have immediately inspired hope. "How could this be?", Isaiah's hearers would have wondered. The very next verses then point to the coming of God in a unique and powerful way that completely undoes the brokenness and failure of humanity as he makes the mountain and hill become level, the valley rose up, and the rough and rugged ground to become level and smooth.
- God reminds the people that although humanity is frail and weak like grass that is here today and gone tomorrow, God's word remains forever. For anyone experiencing a terrible time, this reminds us again of the importance of not looking at our circumstances or situation but to remain fixed on what God has said, promised or revealed. God's purposes will be completed no matter how impossible or implausible it seems.
- The image of God Isaiah casts is hardly like the other deities of the ancient world. They were harsh, militant, sexually abusive, arrogant, and ruthless. How is Yahweh portrayed? "He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." This is a motherly image. One that harkens back to Psalm 23 and David's declaration, "The Lord is my shepherd." As the divided nation goes through their own valley of death, no doubt Isaiah is taking them back to this very image and maybe even intentionally reminding

them of a song they had all song over the years, written by a king who himself went through terrible times of sin, brokenness and danger.

- Isaiah then goes on to ask a series of questions that are meant to help his listeners reposition themselves before God. In short, who is like God in his power or his wisdom to judge him? He obviously knows what he is doing! And don't worry about the nations, they are like a little drop in a bucket compared to his power. In other words, when everything is going wrong, remember the truth about God's power, character and authority. You may feel helpless but he loves you at just the right time he will complete his will and purpose. Faith is a confident trust that demonstrates that we actually know God and his heart.
- Key verses for all of us when we struggle: "Why do you say...and complain... "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God"? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men and women stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary, they will walk and not be faint." This passage, one of the most loved in the Old Testament, stands in powerful contrast to the drama that is surrounding it. God declares through Isaiah that he is able to continually infuse our lives with such energy and encouragement that even in the most desperate of times we will be able to move forward with him. We may have a long journey to walk. That is okay. He will give us daily manna as we travel for years through the desert so that we won't faint. We may have a race to run that is pressured against time and we are facing competing forces that are threatening to crush us. That is okay. Like in the story of Elijah where the power of the Lord enables him to outrun the chariots (1 Kings 18:46). Or maybe what we need to do is humanly impossible. No one can fly. Yet God says your wings of faith combined with the rushing winds of his Spirit can cause you to mount up and do the impossible, like seeing the dead raised or turning back time. Regardless of the challenges we face, God "is able to do immeasurably more (exceedingly and abundantly more) than all we ask or imagine according to his power at work within us..." (Ephesians 3:20).
- This reading ends with a passage that calls God's people his servants and encourages them for it is God's desire to secure and strengthen them for his task. We will see in the coming verses that within these passages about "the servant of the Lord" we will begin to see a vision for a coming servant who will suffer and die for the sins of God's people and through his suffering will bring all people the light of salvation and healing for their brokenness. "I said, 'You are my servant;' I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." May we know the security of God's perfect love that casts out all fear from our lives!