

Book of Isaiah



Lesson 2: Isaiah 3–5

Introduction

The Lord's Judgment

This section describes the Lord's judgment on Jerusalem and Judah because of the sins already described in the preceding oracles.

3:1–3 The first stage of the judgment will be a series of losses: bread, water, soldiers, religious leaders, officers, and the various “magicians, charmers and diviners” who had led the people into sin in the first place. Judges had become corrupt and prophets did not speak the hard words that would challenge people to repent. The military and political leaders sought to maintain their own power rather than sustain the values and truths that God had bestowed upon them.

Commentary

Consequences

3:4 Isaiah 3:4 tells us that God will make boys their princes and give rule to babes. Since boys and babies cannot even govern their own lives and take care of their own needs, the nation will be punished through having such immature and incompetent children rule them.

3:5 The mutual oppression of neighbors is the logical consequence of letting the political leadership get away with oppression. Knowledge and application of moral, righteous principles eludes the people who forsake God's law. When society does not base itself on moral principle, then people use the principle that might makes right. Such is the beginning of the social acceptance of oppression. Isaiah tells us that the people will oppress one another, every man his neighbor, youth will be insolent to elders, and the bases fellow to the honorable.

3:6 In the resulting societal chaos, people will become desperate for any kind of leadership and will accept the flimsiest qualifications for rulers, such as possessing a piece of clothing or a mantle.

3:7 However, with society's circumstances in such dire straits, everyone will reject the offer of governing because they will see no hope for either success against horrible odds or personal advantage in being a leader.

- 3:8–9 In verses 8–9, the inevitable judgment is explained as the consequence of Jerusalem and Judah turning both speech and action against the Lord’s will. Their own sin will testify against them, and the inevitable punishment is due to the evils they themselves have done. No one else is to blame for the coming catastrophe, and the Lord wants them to accept their full responsibility for their coming doom.
- 3:10–11 This is followed by a clarification in verses 10–11 that the wicked are the segment of society that is doomed to the “woe” of coming destruction. However, the righteous shall do well, since the Lord can distinguish between the moral decisions that human beings make and give recompense that is appropriate to the righteous and the wicked.

The Lord’s Dispute

- 3:12 The Lord addresses the people with a lament over the people because the leaders have so misled and confused them that the threats made in 3:4–5 about children oppressing them have come true. The ancients did not accept women as rulers because kings and other leaders were generally expected to lead in war—a frequent experience. Leaders gained the respect of the troops in part by their own ability to fight in battle as well as in having enough battle experience to direct successful war strategies. Certainly Israel’s experience of women in leadership was not positive. Jezebel in the northern Kingdom of Israel killed the Lord’s prophets and promoted Baal worship (1 Kgs 18:4, 13; 19:1–3; 21:5–25). A generation later, Athaliah, in Judah, executed her husband’s sons (from multiple wives) and ruled until the restoration of the surviving boy prince to the throne and her own murder (2 Kgs 11). They were no Margaret Thatcher.
- 3:13–15 The Lord accuses the people of their sins of oppressing the poor. Many of the poor would have been tenant farmers whose crops were exacted by the rich landowners in payment. The attitude that focused strongly on making a profit without concern for the welfare of those who did the work is condemned. This type of practice crushed and ground the poor, ignoring their legitimate needs. Everyone who employs other people needs to consider both the need to make a legitimate profit as well as the good of the workers, each of whom has a dignity from God and personal needs.

Judgment on the Women of Jerusalem

- 3:16–17 In verses 16–17, the Lord accuses the women of Jerusalem of haughtiness that is connected with various seductive activities (16). Therefore the Lord decides to give them skin diseases that ruin the beauty they once showed off in their haughtiness and expose their nakedness for their indecent, seductive behavior in public. The punishment will fit the crime.
- 3:18–23 On the day of the Lord, the punishment meted out to the women includes the loss of the luxury items listed in Isaiah 3:18–23.
- 3:24 These punishments will replace pleasant items with opposite experiences: the stench of rotteness instead of perfume; the rope of a slave instead of a fashionable girdle; rough sackcloth instead of fine clothes; and shame, especially of nakedness and sexual use, instead of beauty.
- 3:25–26 The men who once protected them and acquired their luxuries will die in battle, causing the women to lament and mourn at the city gates that the dead soldiers will leave defenseless.

4:1

Continuing on to Isaiah 4:1, we find the fate of the women after the enemy defeat is that they can expect to be raped. In such a case, they would not be considered marriageable in that culture. Therefore seven such abandoned women will take hold of one man, promising to provide for themselves if he will only marry them and make them honorable women, thus removing the reproach of being shamed and unwanted.



Prophecy of Salvation

After the oracles of threats of judgment on the day of the Lord (2:6–4:1), the last section of Isaiah 4:2–6 is a prophecy of salvation on the day of the Lord for the survivors of Israel. In the preceding judgments, the Lord has condemned the people for their pride, arrogance, or haughtiness many times (2:11–17; 3:16), and many of the punishments he decrees are meant to humble the proud.

4:2 This verse promises that on the day of the Lord, they will witness the Lord’s “branch” as the origin of the land’s fruit. The image is one in which the Lord promises the prosperity of a rich harvest for the survivors of Israel. They will recognize that this branch will be “beautiful and glorious” because it comes from the Lord. The survivors will take pride in the fruit, not the way most farmers show for the work of their hands but rather in the fact that the origin of the fruit is from the Lord, not their own labor. In that way, they will live humbly as they honor the Lord’s work.

4:3 These verses describe the hope for the men and women of Jerusalem. The people will be holy, which has a sense of being set apart for the Lord. They will be “recorded for life” in the Lord’s book and therefore, like registered citizens, will be permitted to live in the holy city on the day of the Lord. The idea of the Lord having a book to record his people is not developed at length in the Bible, but it is first mentioned in Exodus 32:32–34, where the Lord says, “Whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book,” and mentions this for the “day” he visits people’s sins on them. See also Ezekiel 13:9 and Luke 10:20 (“your names are written in heaven”). The “book of life” is mentioned in Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; 21:27.

4:4 These holy survivors are not without all stain of sin, but what distinguishes them from the previously mentioned doomed people is the fact that the Lord has “washed away” the filth of the women and the bloodstains from the men with his “spirit of judgment” and “burning.” Naturally, Christians will see in this a promise of baptism that washes away sins and the purifying gift of the Holy Spirit. This prophecy adds to our understanding of Christ’s saying, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5).

4:5 Mount Zion, the site of the Temple, will have an experience like that of the Israelites walking through the Sinai desert, where a cloud protected them from the sun by day and a fire guided them at night (Ex 13:21–22; 14:19–20, 24; 40:34–38) and where the cloud covered them at the time of the dedication of the desert temple (Nm 9:15–22). The day of the Lord will be a new beginning, as the exodus experience was the old beginning for the people.

Song of the Vineyard

This section is named the “song of the vineyard” because the prophet states that he will sing this poem. However, the content is a trial scene in which the Lord is acquitted of any mistake, but Judah is convicted of being in the wrong. The request to sing the song is made to an unnamed audience.

5:1 This is a “love song” about his beloved friend’s relationship with his vineyard. The word for “beloved” is *dod*, the same Hebrew root as the name David. Isaiah’s use of “beloved” here certainly influenced the way later Jewish exegesis of the Song of Solomon used the same word (2:16; 5:2; 5:16; 6:3). In the Song of Solomon, the word is applied to the Lord, while Israel was the bride in that Song. This was also used by Christian commentators on the Song (St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Bernard) to understand the Lord’s relationship to the Church or to the individual soul.

Psalm 80:8–13 uses the image of a vineyard to describe Israel, but the Psalm questions God for permitting enemies to break down its walls and have “boars” eat its fruit. Isaiah makes it clear in this passage that Israel is completely in the wrong and will receive deserved punishment.

5:2 The singer presents the evidence of the great care his beloved (the Lord) had put into locating his vineyard on a fertile hill that was hoed, cleared of stones, planted with an excellent variety of vines, provided with a vat hewn into the stone (examples of which can still be seen in Israel), and protected with a watchtower. Everything was completely ready for an excellent harvest of wine. However, it yielded “wild grapes.” The word for “wild” means “smelly, stinky,” like certain foul-smelling berries that grow wild and cannot be eaten. This refers to the harvest of immorality and the lack of justice in Israel.

5:3 Witnesses in Jerusalem and Judah are here summoned to judge between the owner, who is now speaking for himself as “I,” and the vineyard (3).

5:4 He uses rhetorical questions to remind this jury of the facts of his case: there was nothing more he was able to do for his vineyard; why did it yield foul grapes (4)?

5:5 The verdict: the owner will remove its protecting wall and hedge so it can be trampled by the unappreciative and devoured by those who have no taste for good grapes.

5:6 The owner will personally turn it into a waste and, in a threat that reveals the owner’s identity as the Lord, he will command the clouds to give it no rain.

5:7 With the identity of the owner already revealed in verse 6, the Lord makes clear that the vineyard is Israel and the sought after harvest was justice. However, the “stinky” grapes that Israel and Judah produced were bloodshed and the outcry of those who were oppressed.

Series of Woes

This next long section lists a series of “woes” against Israel for its sins. Recall Isaiah 1:4, where “woe” was said to someone doomed to die or suffer greatly. It is used most frequently in Isaiah,

and this passage has the greatest concentration of woes in the Bible until Matt. 23, where there are seven woes against the Pharisees as opposed to six in this section of Isaiah.

- 5:8 The first woe is against those who buy up the property of the poor when they go bankrupt and then evict them from their houses and land. These landowners may be rich in land and houses, but they end up being isolated as their neighbors leave.
- 5:9 To this situation, the Lord will add the desolation of the houses by the removal of the inhabitants in war (9).
- 5:10 Without people to work the land, it will become nearly worthless, producing one “*bath*” (about 3 gallons) of wine from ten acres of vines or a “*homer*” of seed (ten bushels) producing an *ephah* (one bushel).
- 5:11 The second and longest woe is directed against those who drink intoxicants throughout the whole day while people are without knowledge, food, or water. Isaiah describes the constant state of intoxication, from early morning to late night with “strong drink,” a type of beer (distilled liquor would not be discovered for another 1,600 years) and wine. They keep entertained in their stupor, since drunkenness does not suffice for them.
- 5:12 Of course, in such an addled state they make themselves incapable of paying attention to God’s deeds and work. In no way can drunks discern God’s activity or will because they have given up control of their minds to a substance. The effects of their drunken inability to discern God’s will have a destructive impact on the rest of society.
- 5:13 The people do not have knowledge, and in their ignorance they will end up in exile. People die of hunger and thirst while the rich leadership is drunk with wine and beer all day.
- 5:14–15 Because the people die of starvation and thirst, Sheol, the place of the dead, is more than sated with these dead people. As was the case in the threats of the day of the Lord, this woe will also lead to the humiliation of the proud and arrogant, presumably those who think that they can live an intoxicated life while others starve.
- 5:16 The punishment of the evildoers becomes the occasion for the exaltation of the Lord because his justice, holiness, and righteousness are made clear in the contrast with evil. He demonstrates that evil cannot overcome goodness, but righteousness defeats evil by showing its inherent tendency to the ultimate doom of its plans in death.
- 5:17 The contrast with evil is made more clear when the humble and gentle lambs, fatlings, and kid goats feed peacefully in the ruins of houses where the drunks and gluttons had lived in debauchery.
- 5:18–19 The third woe is against sinners who speak falsehood and then treat faith in God with cynicism, demanding that God perform some sign or miracle so they can see it as proof. Similar arguments were frequently brought up to Jesus (Mt 12:28–41; 16:1–4; Mk 8:11–12; Lk 11:16; Jn 2:18–19; 4:48) even after he had just performed miracles. Scoffers were also criticized in 2 Peter 3:3–12. Psalm 73 describes cynical scoffers at length, though with the sense that the psalmist was himself tempted to imitate them—a danger Isaiah may implicitly have in mind.
- 5:20 The fourth woe is against those who refuse to accept that which is authentic goodness and choose that which is dark and evil as their preferred “good.” This criticism applies well in the relativistic world that redefines values and characterizes the modern moral discourse.
- 5:21 The fifth woe belongs to the arrogance of self-assured people who consider themselves intelligent when they are no longer able to understand the basic principles of determining right from wrong.

5:22–23 The sixth woe combines the criticism of the intoxicated with that of the politically corrupt, such as those who take bribes and deprive the innocent of their rights.

5:24 The whole list of woes concludes with a decree of punishment for all those against whom the woes were decreed. They are like mere dried grass or short stubble that burns quickly or like a rot that lies in the root of a plant and makes its blossom turn to dust at the merest touch. The key to understanding the woes is that all of the sinners had turned against the Lord's law and word. Their personal opinions and the primacy of their experiences of pleasure took precedence over the law and word of the Lord. However, in these woes, they are confronted by the word of the Lord that is based on the principles of his law, and as a result, they will be destroyed. While this primarily applied to the people of Isaiah's time, it will fit the drug culture, relativistic morality, and narcissism of the modern world that ignores true goodness and the need to care for those in need.

This description of the Lord's final judgment is the conclusion of the first five chapters of Isaiah. Most of the preceding oracles have criticized the nation's social sins. Here the scene of God's judgment is presented. The Lord appears in a theophany (a manifestation of God) with anger and an outstretched hand to punish the sinners he has criticized throughout the first five chapters of Isaiah.

5:25 Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people. He stretched out his hand against them, smote them, and the mountains quaked; and their corpses were as refuse in the midst of the streets. For all this, his anger is not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.

5:26 The Lord will use a distant foreign nation to affect the judgment in history. This nation was unknown in the lifetime of Uzziah, but at the time of his death, Tiglath-Pileser III will usurp the Assyrian throne and turn it into an empire that aggressively moves west to subdue the nations of western Asia, including Israel and Judah. The announcement of the summons of the distant nation that comes quickly to the Lord's signal is like an animal trained to hunt prey; this nation will respond quickly to the Lord's summons because it wants to take part in the destruction of others.

5:27–28 The enemy is well prepared for the punitive battle: well rested, properly uniformed for a fight, with plenty of ammunition, and with proper chariots, which served as the equivalent of the tank in modern warfare.

5:29–30 The fierce eagerness of the enemy's ferocity is compared to that of lions who are determined to take their prey with no one to stop them. This will not occur in King Uzziah's time (he died in 743 BC), but Assyria's aggression will dominate the rest of Proto-Isaiah up through chapter 33, plus the additions from 2 Kings in Isaiah 36–39. This passage is ominous indeed.

Rome to Home

Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity. Love—*caritas*—is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace. It is a force that has its origin in God, Eternal Love and Absolute Truth. Each person finds his good by



adherence to God's plan for him, in order to realize it fully: in this plan, he finds his truth, and through adherence to this truth he becomes free (cf. Jn 8:32). To defend the truth, to articulate it with humility and conviction, and to bear witness to it in life are therefore exacting and indispensable forms of charity. Charity, in fact, "rejoices in the truth" (1 Cor 13:6). All people feel the interior impulse to love authentically: love and truth never abandon them completely, because these are the vocation planted by God in the heart and mind of every human person. The search for love and truth is purified and liberated by Jesus Christ from the impoverishment that our humanity brings to it, and he reveals to us in all its fullness the initiative of love and the plan for true life that God has prepared for us. In Christ, charity in truth becomes the Face of his Person, a vocation for us to love our brothers and sisters in the truth of his plan. Indeed, he himself is the Truth (cf. Jn 14:6).

*Pope Benedict XVI
Caritas In Veritate*

6. The fourth woe (Is 5:20) deals with people who call evil good and good evil and who deal in falsehoods. What does the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Bible say about falsehood? (See CCC 2475 and 2482; also Prv 12:22)

Voices of the Saints

Charity is no substitute for justice withheld.

~St. Augustine

For Reflection or Group Discussion

In this lesson, the Lord accuses the people of the sin of oppressing the poor. Employers have the right to make a legitimate profit, but they must consider the dignity of those who do the work and also their right to make a fair wage. What are your feelings about “sweat shops” and the fact that some companies in the U.S. make use of this kind of cheap labor?



Notes

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