

## Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel

*Major Prophets:* The phenomenon of Old Testament prophecy may seem extraordinary to modern man, especially considering similar experiences recorded among pagan cultures throughout the ancient near east. However, the role of the prophet among the people of God is truly unique in comparison to the distinctive message delivered as well as the willingness of the prophet himself to suffer harsh punishment and even death because of his proclamation. The word of the prophet was no mere exercise in religious experience, it was the quintessential scenario of a covenant God addressing his people living in a manner that does not reflect their calling. Even so, the mission of God is clarified and explicated in an unprecedented way in the period of the prophets.

*The objective of this class* is to explore the depth of the sin of the OT people of God as well as the great grace of God as he continues his redemptive plan throughout history. We will explore the world and message of the Major Prophets seeking to answer the question, what was the message of the prophets to the OT people of God, and what is their message for the people of God today

Introduction: When undertaking, the monumental yet rewarding task of studying the biblical books known as the major prophets, it is easy to become discouraged by the intelligibility of their message in one extreme, or disillusioned by the universality of their message in the other. In our own day, there are those who would read into the message of the prophets a twenty-first century interpretation that would have been far removed from the minds of the original authors. A desire for the esoteric, and a passion for secret information that will disclose details of a final cataclysmic end often occupies the minds of modern readers. When we attempt to step back in time and ask the question, what is really happening among the covenant community, and what is God communicating to his people then and now, we realize how much of our pre-conceived ideas have very little to do with the true meaning of this supernatural episode known as the prophetic era. However, if the church is to be true to the timeless mission to remain a prophetic voice in our own day, it is expedient for a true understanding of the message of the prophets to be ascertained and applied.

Israel, the OT people of God, had been living in the land for some time. They had experienced national revival in an unprecedented form under the reign of King David, and were witness to the tangible presence of God among his people within the confines of the temple constructed by Solomon. The temple site facilitated worship of the one true God, worship that soon took on a veneer of sincerity, but was unfortunately ritualized and compartmentalized to the extent that it had little direct influence on the lifestyle of God's people. It is into this context that Isaiah comes bearing a message (or series of messages) for the hypocritical people of God.

Before we move forward with the first text of Isaiah, a brief clarification as to the term "major" prophets should be offered. First, the term is not intended to be qualitative. All prophetic books are equally important in the grand scheme of divine revelation. Secondly, the term is used to distinguish prophets with extensive careers who wrote lengthy works from those whose writing was brief or unrecorded. Four prophets serve as anchors for this period due to the volume of their writings (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel). Books written by them collectively make up the genre of Major Prophets.

Part One: Sick in the Head – Isaiah's ministry covered the reigns of at least four kings in Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. When overlaying the content of his sermons with our knowledge of the kingdom of Judah during the days of these four kings, we can gain a better understanding of the conditions of the day. The first five chapters of the book are, according to Alec Motyer, not to be

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understood as chronologically preceding the call and commission of Isaiah given in chapter six, but rather an introduction using declarations made after the prophet's call to further elucidate the spiritual condition of the day.<sup>1</sup> These conditions can be summarized as follows: *"The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and raw wounds; they are not pressed out or bound up or softened with oil"* (1:5b-6). These same conditions are repeatedly described in at least three different ways in the first five chapters. Again, Motyer points out, "These three sections have in common a contrast between the ideal and the actual. The Lord intended his people to live as his children (1:2) to be the city-community of world-wide blessing (2:2-4) and to produce the fruit of righteousness (5:1-7). The actuality proved to be very different..."<sup>2</sup>

The first five chapters are part of a broader section of the book that has as its central character the role of the king – God, the true King, the current descendant of David (Uzziah – Hezekiah), and the future King. It seems that these three motifs of kingship correspond with the way things were intended (God covenantally electing a people for himself and giving that people his law offering instruction for how adherents to his divine rule were to live) contrasted with the way things were under the current earthly descendant of King David, and the way things will yet be when the promised King (seed of Abraham and David) rules in righteousness. Indeed, the spiritual condition of the people of God makes clear that things are not working, and begs the question, what is God going to do?

The spiritual condition is further described in the following manner, *"How the faithful city (Jerusalem) has become a whore, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them"* (1:21-23). The only response to such a condition is judgment, and God will surely send it.

Part Two: Isaiah's Call – We have the call and commission of the prophet Isaiah anchored in time and space with the opening lines of the sixth chapter. *"In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory'"* (6:1-3). There are three notable things about Isaiah's call: first, he saw the Lord, the true King of Israel in the year that the earthly king died, King Uzziah (2 Kings 15:5). Motyer is again correct when he states, "...alongside the dying, defiled king there is the Holy One, the King, the Lord Almighty. The interplay of these two kingships – the holy, divine king and the terminally ill Davidic house – and their envisaged merger in a divine king of David's line becomes the unifying theme."<sup>3</sup> Such a contextual understanding of the call and commission of the prophet should not go without notice since it plays such an important part in the message to Judah going forward.

Secondly, Isaiah is witness to heavenly beings making a three-fold proclamation about the character and glory of God that is superlative in its form and description. The seraphim declare, *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory."* Such a statement is binary in that it says something

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<sup>1</sup> Motyer, Alec. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. Pg. 40-41

<sup>2</sup> Motyer, Alec. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. Pg. 41

<sup>3</sup> Motyer, Alec. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. Pg. 37

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about the character of God (that he is holy, totally other, set apart from the created realm) and that the earth is filled with his glory. God's glory in the earth persists in all of creation despite the curse of the fall. Theologians have long called this reality, *Common Grace*. However, *Particular Grace* (grace that leads to salvation possible only by the atoning work of Christ) is ascribed to the King who is to come in 11:9b.

Finally, Isaiah's response to witnessing this heavenly vision was to become instantaneously self-aware. He declares, "*Woe is me! For I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips; for my eyes, have seen the King, the Lord of hosts*" (6:4). When Isaiah catches a glimpse of the true King of Israel, his own wretchedness (as well as that of the covenant community) becomes so significantly pronounced.

So, what was the nature of Isaiah's divine commission? His success would not be measured by converts, his success would be measured by hardened hearts made ripe for judgement (6:10-13).

Part Three: *The Sign from God* – After the section in which YAHWEH is described as the true king of Israel, we witness an encounter between the grandson of Uzziah (Ahaz) and the oppressive Syrian armies who formed an alliance with the northern kingdom of Israel. Rezin, the king of Syria and Pekah, the king of Israel came against Judah and Jerusalem to destroy it. A quick word about King Ahaz is in order. Ahaz was the grandson of King Uzziah and the son of King Jotham. According to the book of 2 Chronicles he had the following legacy: "*He did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as his father, David had done, but he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He even made metal images for the Baals, and he made offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom and burned his sons as an offering, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree*" (2 Chronicles 28:1-4). It is to this king, besieged by the enemy, that Isaiah the prophet comes bearing the following message, "*Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint... if you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all*" (7:4; 9b).

Again, Isaiah was sent to Ahaz to offer a sign from God that this word would be fulfilled. He declared, "*The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted*" (7:14-16). What was Ahaz's response to this word of assurance? 2 Kings 16:7-8 reveals, "*So Ahaz sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, 'I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me,' Ahaz took the gold that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasures of the king's house and sent a present to the king of Assyria.*" Ahaz failed to obey the voice of the Lord and his disobedience served as the catalyst for bringing the Assyrian army against the northern kingdom, which would result within a decade in their destruction and exile.

Part Four: *To us a Son is Given* – So, what is the response of a covenant making, covenant keeping God to the rebellion of his people? He assures the OT church, "*For every boot of the trampling warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore*" (9:5-7). The coming

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of this child is the response of God to the treachery and iniquity of his people. However, this child will be no ordinary child, he will be the very King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

What about the kingdom, this kingdom that God himself established through covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as Moses and all Israel atop Mt. Sinai? The kingdom was always about the King. The dynasty of David is weakening and will soon fall into decline leading to exile and deportation. There is a promise here given of a future King who would bear the government upon his shoulders. What will his kingdom entail? Will he, too, be forced to defend the domain from outside invasion? A twofold promise is given to this inquiry. Isaiah declares, *"In that day, the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth"* (10:20). The climactic hope of the entire book can be summarized in the passage given in 11:1-10: *"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the spirit from the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waste, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play on the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth, shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day, the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples – of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious."*

It is under the dominion of this king that the previous vision expressed earlier in chapter two will come to fruition: *"It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it"* (2:2). God's response to man's rebellion is *hesed*, unending covenantal love that defies human understanding.

Conclusion: How can we, God's NT church 2,700 years removed from the writing of this prophet, correctly apply the teaching of this section to our lives? To answer this, let us identify some major themes. In chapters one through twelve of Isaiah, the prophet discloses to the people of God (OT and NT), God's intent (1:2-3), man's rebellion (1:21-31; 5:1-7; 7:1-4; 8:11-22), and God's response. God responds in judgment on the covenant community (chapters 3 and 8) as well as the Assyrians (provoked by Ahaz's disobedience and used of God to bring judgement on the northern kingdom). Yet, there is a glorious hope. For Christ, will also redeem a remnant, He will bring restoration (10:20-12:6). This is His ultimate plan!