

Isaiah 28-35

BACKGROUND

- “The key issue in chapters 28-35 is whether Judah, and in particular its leaders, will rely on Egypt or on the Lord in the face of the growing threat posed by the every-increasing power of Assyria.
- “[The invasion of Judah by Assyria under king Sennacherib] was a punitive action taken by Sennacherib in response to a revolt led by Hezekiah. He had refused to pay any further tribute to Assyria and had annexed all the Philistine cities as far south as Gaza, cities which, like Judah, had been part of the Assyrian empire.
- “It was a foolhardy move, and one which he would almost certainly never have taken without the assurance of military backing from Egypt. When the inevitable showdown came, the Egyptians did in fact take to the field against Sennacherib, but were defeated, leaving Judah to bear the full brunt of Sennacherib’s wrath (37:9).
- “Much of Judah was devastated and it was only by a miracle that Jerusalem itself escaped (36:1; 37:36). Hezekiah almost destroyed Judah by listening to those at court who counseled him to rely on Egypt. Chapters 28-35 show how strongly and consistently Isaiah had opposed this foolish counsel in the deepening crisis that led up to the events recorded in chapters 36-37.”¹
- Outline of chapters 28-35:
 - A. 28-29 The crisis: foolish leaders and false counsel
 - B. 30-31 False solution: dependence on Egypt
32-33 True solution: the reign of the Lord as king in the midst of his people
 - C. 34 The ‘desert’ which will result from trusting the nations
35 The ‘garden’ which will result from trusting God
- The dire circumstances in chs. 28-35 were more than just history to the early church. Quoted as many as nine times in the NT, they had an immediacy which allowed Paul to see the spiritual insensitivity of their prophets as continuing in the Jewish rejection of Jesus (Isa 29:10/Rom 11:8; also Isa 29:16/Rom 9:20-21); Jesus to see Isaiah’s description of their obstinacy as a prophecy of the Pharisees (29:13/Mt 15:8-9); Jesus to see the promises of Isa 35:5 fulfilled in his own ministry; etc.

QUESTIONS

1. Who are the six “woes” in chs. 28-35 directed against (cf. 28:1, 29:1, 29:15, 30:1, 31:1 & 33:1)?

¹ Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (IVP), p. 116-117.

2. What does Isaiah prophesy will happen to Judah if they rely upon Egypt rather than God for protection? (See, e.g., 28:17-19; 29:2-4; 30:5; 30:13-14; 32:10-14.) Hezekiah, nevertheless, *does* ally with Egypt against Assyria (36:6). So, when do these curses take place?
3. In 28:19, what is the message which will bring “sheer terror”, and for whom?
4. In 28:21 Isaiah refers to God’s “strange work.” Martin Luther “found much comfort in reflecting that while judgment is Christ’s *strange work*, salvation is his ‘proper work’”². What is Isaiah referring to, and why is it strange?
5. These chapters describe how God, in his compassion and grace (30:18), sought *rest*³ for his people:

[God said,] “This is the resting place, let the weary rest”; and, “This is the place of repose”—but they would not listen. [28:12b]

My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. [32:18]

This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.” [30:15]

(See also 57:2, 20-21.⁴) The author of Hebrews discusses God’s rest in Heb 3-4, drawing particularly on the rest denied those who wandered in the desert, doubting God’s deliverance (Heb 3:8-11). He applies this to the new-covenant context, writing

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

- a) What rest was Israel called to in Isaiah’s time—how could they possibly have rested when awaiting the hammer of Assyria’s cruel and monstrous onslaught?



An illustration from Martin Luther’s *Kercken Postilla, dat ys, Vthlegginge der Epistelen vnd Euangelien, an de Söndagen vnde vornemesten Festen* (1563), depicting Jesus inviting the weary and heavy laden, depicted with crosses, to come to him and receive rest (Mt 11).

² IVP’s *New Bible Commentary*.

³ The Hebrew word used is *menuha*, “a word which represents the sum total of all that was promised to Abraham and confirmed to Israel at Mount Sinai, but especially a secure and peaceful existence in the land he had given them (cf. Dt 12:9; 1 Ki 8:56; Ps 95:11)”—Webb, *ibid.*, p. 119.

⁴ Interestingly, IVP’s *NBC* points out that the Hebrew in 28:16b literally says those who trust “will not be in haste.”

- b) From the Hebrews passage, what does it mean for us to see the new life as one of *rest*? Imagine presenting the Gospel to an unbeliever by describing it as a path back to the rest in the Garden with the Lord of the Sabbath?



Fun fact: Jonathan Edwards is well known for his *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, in which he draws upon (among other passages) Isa 33:12-14, “The people will be burned as if to lime...” as a vision of God’s wrath. His preaching is better characterized by messages of the love and joy of the Christian life—such as his *Safety, Fullness, and Sweet Refreshment, to be Found in Christ*, based on Isa 32:2 (“Each man shall be like a shelter from the wind”), in which he expounds on the “quiet rest and sweet refreshment” to be found in Christ Jesus.⁵

⁵ See *Christian History and Biography*, **8**, “From the Archives.”

Isaiah 28-35, Part II

BACKGROUND

- The Hebrew word *nahath* which is translated “rest” in Isa 30:15 only appears six times in the OT, and only twice is it translated “rest”. The other verses interpret it as “comfort”, “peace”, “quiet” and “tranquility”.

QUESTIONS

6. These chapters describe the danger of trusting in the “nations” rather than God. Two things make it difficult to apply this directly to our lives: (1) Israel, not an individual, is at fault; (2) Israel had specific instructions from the Lord and we often don’t. Fortunately, Ps 118, which Isaiah quotes in 28:16, carries the same basic message. What does Ps 118 say about an individual’s reliance on God?⁶ In what ways are you tempted to rely upon others when you should rely on God? What curses might follow you (cf. 5:18) as a result?
7. In these chapters Isaiah paints a picture of the coming kingdom of God. List its attributes as found in chapters 32, 33 and 35.
8. The kingdom of God is central to Jesus’ preaching. In the parables, we learn that the kingdom will start small and spread thoroughly (mustard seed and leaven), is spread via the Gospel message (sower), brings great joy, and is worth sacrificing everything for (pearl and hidden treasure). There is no doubt that Jesus’ view of the kingdom was informed by Isaiah—Jesus describes his ministry by quoting Isaiah 35 and 61 to John the Baptist in Mt 11:7.

Which attributes of the Isaiah’s description of the kingdom of God (from Q. 7) are in harmony with Jesus’ predictions of the coming of the kingdom?

9. In Mt 3:12 John the Baptist describes Jesus as a Messiah who will bring judgment: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering up his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Given these expectations, it’s no wonder John sends his disciples to ask Jesus whether he got it right, and Jesus really is the Messiah (Mt 11). Jesus responds by alluding to Isa 35:5-6 (“...the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed...”) and 61:1 (“...He has sent me to bring good news to the poor...”).

Interestingly, both of these passages *also* speak of God’s judgment: 61:2 anticipates “a day of vengeance for our God”, and 35:4 says, “Look, your God is coming, vengeance is coming, the



⁶ One may also ask what Ps 118 said to Jesus, who quoted it before his passion (Mt 21:42).

retribution of God; he is coming to save you.”⁷

How did the two aspects of the kingdom, blessing and judgment, fit together in Isaiah’s message to 8th-century Judah? In what way is Jesus’ response an answer to John’s question? How does the parable of the weeds address John’s question?

10. 28:9-10 apparently parrots complaints made against Isaiah’s preaching. Isaiah’s response: They won’t listen to him, so they will be forced to listen to God’s message through the even stranger speech of the Assyrians(11-12).

Paul quotes v. 11 in 1 Cor 14:18-25 when addressing questions regarding the gift of tongues. Explain how Paul uses Isaiah to argue that tongues should serve as a witness to unbelievers. How does this fit with the sometimes-used explanation involving “missionary tongues”—i.e., spontaneously speaking in a language you haven’t learned, such as occurred at Pentecost? [*Extra credit*: How would you characterize this allusion to the OT—typology, analogy etc.?)

11. In ch. 30, Isaiah’s prophecy warns those who rely upon others rather than the Lord—but it also promises (vv. 6-7) deliverance for those who “reject the idols of silver and gold your hands have made” when they “so greatly revolted against” their Lord. Of this passage, Carson writes

There is no alternative to repentance, no other way to experience the blessing of the Lord. The nature of repentance in Scripture precludes the nonsense of partial repentance or contingent repentance. Genuine repentance does not turn from one sin while safeguarding others; partial repentance is as incongruous as partial pregnancy. Loyalty to God in selective areas is no longer loyalty, but treason. God does not ask us to give up this or that idol while permitting us to nurture several others; he demands, rather, that we abandon idolatry itself and return to the God against whom we have ‘so greatly revolted.’ For God is more than able to defend his people against the might of Assyria, to unleash a sword ‘not of mortals’ (31:8). The literal fulfillment of this promise is 37:36.⁸

Discuss.



Fun fact: Isa 34:15 has an ancient equivalent of the threat “He’ll knock you back into the dark ages”: “wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith shall repose and find a place to rest” (NRSV). This verse refers to two varieties of demons thought to inhabit abandoned ruins (*NRSV Harper-Collins Study Bible*). The second, Lilith, was the Mesopotamian female night demon (*IVP Bible Background Commentary*). The NIV translates the name as “night creatures”, the NASB as “night monster” and the KJV as “screech owl.” In Rabbinic tradition, Lilith was Adam’s first wife. In Assyrian lore Lilith demons not only preyed on women and children, but were also believed to seduce men in their sleep (*wikipedia alert*). In Babylonian texts, Lilith was the prostitute of the goddess Ishtar. Lilith has appeared in literature and art, including Michelangelo’s *The Temptation of Adam and Eve* and Goethe’s *Faust*, in which Mephistopheles describes her as follows: “Adam’s wife, his first. Beware of her. Her beauty’s one boast is her dangerous hair. When Lilith winds it tight around young men she doesn’t soon let go of them again.”

⁷ The observation from a lecture by Don Carson on the reliability of Scripture, at <http://files.unc-msu.org/mp3/institute/DA06part2.mp3>.

⁸ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, Vol. 2, May 30.