

LESSON 4

JUDGEMENT AGAINST JUDAH

ISAIAH 1:1—5:30

Introduction

As noted in the previous lesson, the Book of Isaiah consists of blocks of material which were not placed in chronological order. Isaiah's inaugural vision in chapter 6 is dated in the year of King Uzziah's death, which most scholars hold was in 742 B.C. The historical events giving rise to chapter 1, however, occurred many years after Isaiah's inaugural vision. Scholars almost unanimously place chapters 1 and 2 in 701 B.C. while Hezekiah was king.

Hezekiah had received a vassal throne from his father Ahaz fourteen years before. He heeded the advice of Isaiah and did not join a revolt against Assyria when Sennacherib came to power in 705 B.C. This revolt was instigated by Egyptian intrigue and centred in the Philistine city of Ashdod. The messages in Isaiah 14 and 20 were given during this period. The Egyptian Pharaoh had sent an ambassador to secure Hezekiah's participation. In 703 B.C., the time seemed favourable for Judah's joining other nations in seeking independence from Assyria; however, Isaiah counselled Hezekiah to stay out of the revolution. His advice was based on his political understanding that Assyria would likely triumph and also on his conviction that Yahweh was in control of history. Even though Assyria did not recognize Yahweh as God, the Creator of all the earth could use pagan nations to accomplish His purposes. Isaiah believed that submission to the Assyrian oppression was submission to Yahweh whose sovereignty enabled Him to use the Assyrians to punish Israel. Judah's security did not rest in a political alliance with Egypt but in repentance and faith in God.

After putting down the revolt in Babylon, Sennacherib marched against the western nations. He defeated the Egyptian army at the Philistine city of Ekron. The Judaeen forces of Lachish fell in 701 B.C., and Jerusalem was besieged. According to Sennacherib's report, forty-six fortified Judaeen cities fell.

Verse 1 appears to be a heading for the entire book of collected oracles given at different times during Isaiah's ministry. "The vision of Isaiah" and "the word that Isaiah . . . saw" (v. 1) indicate that God's revelation to the prophet was both visual and audible.

Read all of the text on this page before doing the following exercise.

Match the date with the event.

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| ___ 742 B.C. | a. Judah joined other nations in revolting against Assyria. |
| ___ 701 B.C. | |
| ___ 705 B.C. | b. The Judaeen forces of Lachish fell and Jerusalem was besieged. |
| ___ 703 B.C. | |
| | c. Sennacherib came to power. |
| | d. King Uzziah died. |

(d-742 B.C., b-701 B.C., c-705 B.C., a-703 B.C.)

Place an X by two reasons Isaiah counselled against Judah's revolt against Assyria.

- 1. Assyria would likely defeat Hezekiah. ___*
- 2. The war would cost too much. ___*
- 3. The other nations would not stand firm. ___*
- 4. Yahweh was in control of history. ___*

(1.X, 4.X)

The Rebellion of God's People

Isaiah 1:2-31

The consequences of Judah's rebellion (1:2-9).—

"Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken" is an introductory formula for a literary form known as the covenant lawsuit.¹ The covenant relationship is reviewed, and Israel's rebellion is pointed out (vv. 2ff.). God had delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage and made them His people, but they rebelled against Him. Isaiah was commissioned to announce for God that the Covenant had been broken; therefore, radical judgement was forthcoming. The ox and the ass may stray during the day, but they are intelligent enough to return to their master at feeding time. Israel, on the other hand, showed no discernment and deserted God who had provided for her (v.3).

In verses 4-9, the prophet became the author of the admonition to the people concerning their iniquities. He explained that their suffering was a result of their sinfulness. Their country was desolate and their cities lay in ashes (v. 7). Strangers had occupied the land, and only Jerusalem was left standing (v. 8). The prophet addressed the people in a progressively personal way: nation, people, seed, and sons (v. 4). The background to these verses seems to have been Sennacherib's invasion in 701 B.C.

Judah is described as a fearfully beaten and wounded person who could endure no more (vv. 5f.). Hezekiah was shut up in Jerusalem by Sennacherib and had to beg for terms. Judaeans cities had been destroyed. By using the analogy of a bruised body, Isaiah saw no sound spot where a new wound might be inflicted, no place where Judah could be smitten further. Only Jerusalem was left standing (v. 8), but the people continued to be estranged from their Creator and Sustainer. The hand of the Lord was so heavy upon Judah that she would have been utterly destroyed, like Sodom and Gomorrah, if the Lord had not left a remnant (v. 9).

The fallacy of superficial ritualism (1:10-20).—

Ritualism is valuable in expressing sincere worship and devotion to God, but the multiplication of sacrifices by people with rebellious hearts is abominable to the Lord. As long as the hands of the people are full of bloodshed and their lives stained with sin, the Lord is made weary with ritualistic forms of religion.

¹See G. E. Wright, "The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32," Israel's Prophetic Heritage, ed. B. W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 26-27.

What was the result of Israel's breaking the Covenant by deserting God who had provided for her?

(God's promised blessings to Israel changed to severe judgement.)

True or false?

God punished Judah for her sin by sending a famine which left the country desolate.

(false)

Three reasons why Israel's ritualism was unacceptable to God were:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

- 1. The people's hearts were rebellious.*
- 2. Their hands were full of bloodshed.*
- 3. Their lives were stained with sin.)*

The prophet used the analogy of Sodom and Gomorrah in referring to Judah's wickedness (v. 10). In spite of their wicked deeds, the men of Judah believed that God's favour could be purchased by multiplying the prescribed sacrifices and repeating appropriate prayers. Isaiah joined other prophets in emphasizing righteousness and justice in daily living. He was not against ritualistic religion but saw that external religious forms which are contradicted by actions and attitudes of the worshipper are nothing more than pious hypocrisy. The same law which prescribes sacrifices requires righteousness. In the sacrificial system, the whole body of rams, the fat of dead beasts, and the blood of bulls were offered to God by burning them on the altar (vv. 11). Since God is not a physical being who is dependent on meat for food, these offerings were of no value to Him. They were valuable only when they symbolized the joining together of the worshipper with his God in a fellowship meal. The sacrificial system symbolized the people's approaching God. If their hearts were filled with iniquity, sacrifices became an attempt to appease God rather than to express a relationship with Him. Since God loves man, man's sacrificial expression of a relationship is valuable to God. Since God is spirit, He does not need man's worthless offerings for survival (v. 13). No one can practise iniquity and still participate acceptably in the solemn assemblies.

Religious festivals were scheduled for the beginning of each month, at the appearing of the new moon, and at other times during the year. The purpose of the festivals was for Israel to recognize and express gratitude to God for His blessings; however, their use as attempts to buy God's favour made them a burden to Yahweh (v. 14). The wicked deeds meant that the prayers were from hands stained with blood rather than hearts made pure by confession and righteous living (v. 15).

The washing required of Judah was a symbolic act which signified repentance (v. 16). Repentance opens the way for God to remove the guilt of deeds already committed and for the change from evil to good deeds. Righteous living includes ceasing to do evil, learning to do good, seeking justice for all men, relieving the oppressed by chastening oppressors, and helping orphans and widows (v. 17).

Those who have rebelled against their Creator and turned to lives of sin are invited to consider the unreasonableness of their actions (v. 18). God is merciful and willing to forgive and remove their sins if they are willing to obey. To walk in rebellion means God's judgement by a foreign army, but repentance and obedience mean to eat the good of the land (vv. 19f.).

Ritualistic worship is worthless when _____

Sacrifices are valuable when _____

(contradicted by acts and attitudes of worshippers, they symbolize the fellowship between God and the worshipper)

True or false?

The religious festivals had become burdensome to Yahweh because expressions of gratitude had become attempts to buy God's favour.

(true)

List 5 qualities of righteous living.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The judgement of sinful Jerusalem (1:21-31). —

The section opens with a lament over the rise and fall of Jerusalem which had been a faithful city, worshipping only Yahweh but later worshipping other gods (v. 21). While Yahweh was worshipped, His Covenant was kept and righteousness prevailed. After the people turned to idolatry and disregarded God's Covenant, they began breaking the commandments — worshipping other gods, murdering, stealing, deceiving, and doing other wrongs. Righteousness describes primarily man's relation to God, while justice refers to his relation to his fellowman (v. 21). Righteousness reflects the character of God Himself.

The absence of righteousness and justice in Jerusalem brought God's wrath upon the people. They expected God to deliver them out of the hands of the enemy and Jerusalem to be impregnable. To their surprise, Isaiah pronounced God's judgement against them and defeat at the hands of the enemy. The purpose of the judgement was to remove the dross in order that righteousness and justice would return to the cities (vv. 25f). The passage contains a veiled reference to the righteous remnant left after the evil masses have been destroyed by an invading enemy.

Isaiah predicted that God's judgement would have the effect of delivering a remnant who would build up Zion once more and dwell in it (v. 27). This verse does not mean that the people qualified for salvation through their justice but rather that the Lord's judgement resulted in a righteous remnant. Rebels and sinners who forsook the Lord would be destroyed (v. 28). The evil is identified as idolatry—idols made from oak trees or idolatrous rites carried on beneath oaks. Those who worshipped idols made from oak trees would perish like their idols (v. 30). Tow was the fiber of flax and other plants and was used to start fires. The strong man would be consumed by fire like the flax fibers which were used to start fires.

The Day of the Lord

Isaiah 2:1-22

Universal peace (2:1-5).—Isaiah 2:2-4 is almost identical to Micah 4:1-3. Chapter 2 opens with a second superscription and contains a messianic oracle in which the Messiah is not specifically mentioned. Scholars have debated whether Isaiah or Micah was the author of the oracle. Some scholars suggest that it was a well-known oracle which both prophets borrowed. It states that the religion of Yahweh, which was centred in Zion or Jerusalem, would become increasingly important in the world. When Yahweh was recognized as God by all nations, wars would cease. The verses suggest a supernatural triumph for Yahweh. The oracle points to a time when all the nations of the world would come to Mount Zion in Jerusalem (the Temple) to learn of the ways of Yahweh (God of Jacob). Those nations were worshipping idols, but the time would

After the people turned to idolatry and disregarded God's Covenant, they began _____ other _____, _____, _____, and _____.

(worshipping, gods, murdering, stealing, deceiving)

The absence of _____ and _____ in Jerusalem brought God's _____ upon the people.

(righteousness, justice, wrath)

Isaiah 2:2-4 and Micah 4:1-3 are almost identical. Scholars suggest that either Isaiah or Micah was the author and the other borrowed from him or the well-known _____ pre-dates both and was _____ by both prophets.

(oracle, borrowed)

come when they would recognize Yahweh as the only true God who judges all people. This universal recognition of the authority of Yahweh would result in a time of peace in which swords would be made into plow shares and spears into pruning-hooks. Peace will result only when the law of Yahweh is observed throughout the world.

The Day of Yahweh (2:6-22).—The Day of Yahweh has reference primarily to the time of the Lord's triumph over His foes. Israel expected that day to be a time of victory and salvation; however, Isaiah and other prophets pointed out that it would be a day of judgement because of the sins of God's people: "For Thou hast abandoned Thy people, the house of Jacob, because they are filled with influences from the East, and they are soothsayers like the Philistines, and they strike bargains with the children of foreigners" (v. 6, NASB). God's abandonment of Jacob meant that they were left defenceless before the enemy. Jacob at first abandoned Yahweh, turning to soothsayers for knowledge of the future. The land became filled with wealth and instruments of war, indicating that the people's trust was in material possessions and weapons of war rather than in God (v. 7). In addition, the people were guilty of idolatry, thus breaking the first commandment (v. 8). Their pride caused them to exalt themselves and resulted in the making of their own gods, but all would be brought low (v. 9) when God judged His people. The severity of judgement would cause sinners to seek refuge in caves and to hide in the dust in order to escape the terror of the Lord (vv. 10f.). Isaiah saw the root of man's problem as pride.

Yahweh's judgement is extended beyond Israel to include everyone who is proud and lofty (v. 12). Yahweh who is Creator of all nations is also Judge. Certain items of nature, such as the cedars of Lebanon and the oaks of Bashan, symbolize human pride and are objects of abasement along with the accomplishments of man (vv. 13ff.). A description of man's fear of Yahweh is repeated, and the vanity of idolatry is emphasized (vv. 19ff.). Man's frailty is symbolized by the breath of his nostrils—a sign of life (v. 22).

The Severity of Coming Judgement
Isaiah 3:1—4:1

The collapse of society (3:1-15).—The destruction from God's judgement was predicted to be so severe that leaders and skilled artisans would disappear from Judah (vv. 1-4). The removal of military leaders would leave Israel defenceless. The loss of judges, elders, and counsellors would leave the people without justice. Boys and babes who lack wisdom and experience would occupy places of leadership. Obviously the country would be in turmoil. The people would become so desperate that they would base qualifications for leadership on one's owning a mantle (v. 6). Judah's

The oracle points to a time when all nations will come to _____ and _____ Judah's God, _____ will cease, and the _____ of _____ will be observed throughout the world.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

True or False?

1. *The time of the Lord's triumph over His foes and His judgement of sinners is called by Isaiah the Time of Triumph. _____*
2. *Isaiah saw the root of man's problem as pride. _____*
3. *Yahweh's judgement did not extend beyond Israel. _____*

(1. False 2. True 3. False)

Place an X by three results of God's severe judgement?

1. *The loss of judges, elders, and counsellors would leave the people without justice. _____*
2. *There would be no future hope for Israel or Judah. _____*
3. *The loss of military leaders would leave them defenceless. _____*
4. *Leaders and skilled artisans would disappear. _____*

(Compare your answer with the text.)

destruction would come as a result of her rebellion against Yahweh who dwelt in her midst (in the Temple). Instead of worshipping Him at the Temple, the people had turned aside to worship at places dedicated to idols. They had brought evil on themselves. As in the days of Sodom, the righteous would be permitted to escape judgement and to benefit from their labours, but the wicked would reap the fruit of their actions (vv. 10ff.). The elders and princes of the people had perverted judgement and crushed God's people, especially the poor, but the Lord would judge justly (vv. 13ff.).

The sins of the women (3:16--4:1).—The women who had been enjoying luxury and ease, who walked haughtily with "stretched forth necks and wanton eyes" and displayed their ornaments, were loathed by Yahweh. Isaiah recognized that the nation's destiny was determined largely by the moral quality of the women. Their pressing their husbands for more luxuries and ornaments led to deceitfulness in business matters. Their sensuality led to moral degeneration. Their idolatry undermined the spiritual strength of the nation.

Yahweh's judgement would include these women. Clothes, ornaments, and perfumes which were valuable to them would be removed (vv. 18-24). Their beautiful hair would be replaced with scabious sores. Their men would die in battle, and they would be left alone to mourn (vv. 25f.). The desperation of a widow in the ancient Near Eastern culture is symbolized by the radical action stated in 4:1. Aging women in that society were dependent on sons to produce their food. They would become so desperate that seven would take hold of one man to be their husband and would pledge to produce their own food and clothing.

Future Hope for God's People

Isaiah 4:2-6

The prophet continued to speak of the Day of Yahweh, "In that day . . ." (v. 2). "The branch of the Lord" likely means more than fruitfulness of the land in the Day of Yahweh. Perhaps Isaiah was referring to the coming of the Messiah in the latter days. The remnant which survived the judgement and was left in Jerusalem would be called holy and would experience the constant protective presence of Yahweh (v. 3). Wickedness would be purged from the people by "the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning" (v. 4). During prosperous times, the people had become proud and independent of their Creator and Sustainer. After losses during invasion and the burning of possessions by the enemy, the people who survived would turn to Yahweh because of physical and spiritual needs. Those who entered the Kingdom of the New Age must have their filth washed away and their sin of bloodshed purged. God's presence in that Kingdom would bring protection and provision as during the days of the wilderness journeys (vv. 5f.).

List three ways the haughty women contributed to injustice and immorality.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

When Isaiah spoke of "The branch of the Lord," perhaps he was referring to the coming of the _____ in the _____.

(Messiah, latter days)

The Basis for Judgement

Isaiah 5:1-30

The parable of the vineyard (5:1-7).—The song is in the form of a parable. The good vineyard had every opportunity to produce good fruit, but it brought forth only bitter wild grapes. The vineyard contained all that was necessary for a good harvest: fertility, proper cultivation, choice vines, and protection (vv. 1f.). Judah, as God's vineyard, was confronted with the question of what more could have been done by Yahweh (vv. 3f.). Just as the farmer abandons an unfruitful vineyard, so Yahweh would abandon His unfaithful people and leave them to be devoured by the enemy: the wall and hedge would be destroyed (v. 5).

Woes upon the wicked (5:8-30).—The prophet denounced in a series of woes the chief national sins of Judah. The first woe is against greedy landowners who, perhaps by dishonest and oppressive methods, gained property from the small farmers. Their estates had become so large that they were left without neighbours (v. 8). After the owners were taken by the enemy from the land, their beautiful houses would be vacant and the unattended vineyards would not even return in harvest the amount of seed required to plant them (v. 9). The second woe is against the irresponsible use of wine and strong drink (v. 11). Drunkards who gave no heed to God's command and drank excessively would die of thirst and hunger in exile (v. 13). Sheol is the place of the dead; it was thought to lie under the earth. It is pictured as a monster with a gaping mouth ready to swallow Jerusalem (v. 14). The noisy bustling mob would be brought to silence. In contrast to the boisterous and evil ways of man, Yahweh is exalted in righteousness (v. 16).

The third woe is pronounced upon those who were harnessed to their sin and drew it after them as oxen draw the cart and against those who challenged God to reveal His power (vv. 18f.). The fourth woe is against those who were so depraved that they called evil good and good evil (v. 20). The fifth woe is against those who were proud and clever in their own sight (v. 21). They would be cut off from true wisdom which is the counsel of the Holy One. The sixth woe, like the second, deals with the problem of drunkenness (v. 22). The men who knew how to mix strong drinks also knew how to gain favourable decisions from unscrupulous judges (v. 23). All those who committed evil would be like plants at the end of the growing season: the stubble is burnt and the roots decay (v. 24).

Because the people had rejected the law of the Lord, He would express His anger through a foreign nation as His agent of punishment (v. 26). The enemy would come rapidly and devour the land. Like the lion which growls when it sees its prey and no one is able to stop it, so no one would be able to prevent the enemy from taking Judah into captivity (v. 29). Judah would then be described as a land of darkness and sorrow.

Underline the correct word or words.

Judah had (all, none) of the opportunities of fruitfulness, but (failed, succeeded) in being fruitful and (would not, would) be abandoned by Yahweh.

(all, failed, would)

When you have finished reading Woes upon the wicked (5:8-30), list the groups of people whom the woes were against.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

(1. greedy landowners, 2. drunkards, 3. those who sinned and challenged God to reveal His power, 4. the depraved who called evil good and good evil, 5. the proud and clever and the bribers)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3)

1. State briefly the historical background to Isaiah 1 and 2. _____

2. Give two reasons for Isaiah's counsel which opposed Judah's revolt against Assyria. _____

3. Why did God's promised blessings to Israel change to severe judgement? _____

4. How did God punish Judah for her sin? _____

5. Why was Israel's ritualistic worship unacceptable to God? _____

6. Why is ritualistic worship worthless when contradicted by the actions and attitudes of the worshipper? _____

7. Why had religious festivals become a burden to Yahweh? _____

8. List five requirements for righteous living. _____

9. What happened after the people of Jerusalem disregarded God's Covenant? _____

10. What is the possible relation between Isaiah 2:1-4 and Micah 4:1-3? _____

11. List three teachings of the oracle in Isaiah 2:1-4. _____

12. What did Isaiah mean by the Day of the Lord or that day? _____

13. How severe was God's judgement to be on Judah? _____

14. How did the haughty women of Judah contribute to injustice and immorality? _____

15. Interpret Isaiah 4:2. _____

16. What does the parable of the vineyard teach? _____

17. List the groups of people against whom the woes of 5:8-30 were pronounced. _____

Supplementary activity (Levels 2 and 3)

Read pages 23-34 in The Book of Isaiah, by Wright, and answer the following questions.

1. What social custom furnished the background for the judgement scene in 1:2-4?
2. What is the real purpose of God's judgement (cf. 4:2-6)?
3. Interpret the meaning of "he hath stretched forth his hand against them" (5:25).

Advanced activity (Level 3)

1. Briefly summarize the message of Isaiah 1-5.
2. Give the different introductions to Isaiah and tell how they are explained.

Seminar Discussion

1. Should ritual be included in worship?
2. What are the conditions for world peace?
3. Isaiah pronounced woes against wrong practices in his day (cf. 5:8ff.). Which practices continue to be problems today, and what should you do about solving the problems?
4. Discuss preaching values contained in Isaiah 1-5.